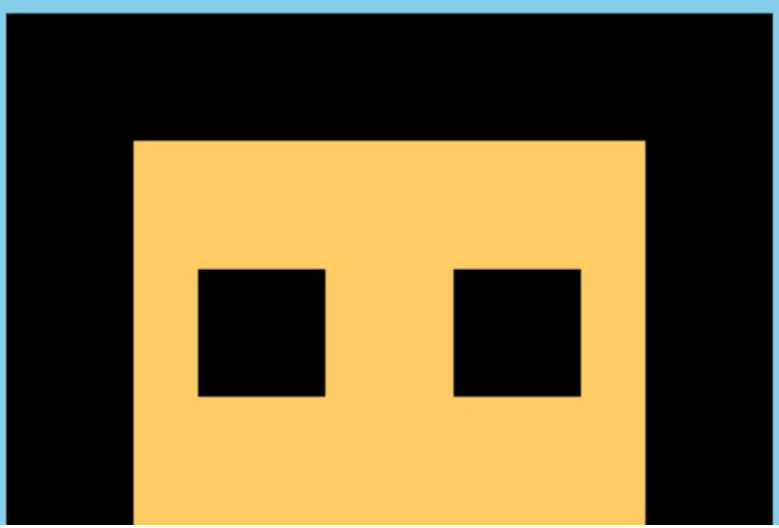
a ridiculous web serial by JESSE GORDON

# THE COMPLETE SUPERMEGANET



# The Complete
# SuperMegaNet

2008 – 2024

a ridiculous web serial by

**Jesse Gordon**

CREAM-COLORED COFFEE CUP

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Published 2024 by Cream-Colored Coffee Cup

Cover design by Annoying Red Dot
Edited by John Precarius
Formatting by A Darned Good Book

Published in the United States of America

*The original Runt Squad, clockwise from top-left: Jan, Theo, Eva, Ernie. Illustration by Abbey Cardenas.*

**Four children and IT** – "What if you could never turn off your friends?" That's the concept behind *SuperMegaNet*, the long-running improvisational web serial I started in August, 2008 as a means of killing precious time. The basic premise: four unlikely friends are permanently linked together when they install a social media app that allows them to upload to and from each other's phones/computers at the swipe of a finger, the click of a mouse. Of course, they get more than they bargain for when they discover that the app can't be turned *off*...

This is it: all of *SuperMegaNet* in a single handy volume, including the infamous *El Cassetto* story arc in its entirety. The episodes have been compiled chronologically in the order they were originally posted online during my heady Wordpress days (and brief stint at the now-defunct supermeganet.com). Otherwise, there's no specific continuity to what's really just a collection of casual vignettes and half-assed story arcs examining life in the suburbs through a satirical and oftentimes surreal comedic lens. At times, reading in order is helpful; at others, it's completely pointless. My advice? Use *The Complete SuperMegaNet* as a toilet aid, something light and fluffy that's consumed in brief bursts as bowel movements dictate. Skip around, or read from front to back, or right to left, or upside down while eating a nacho platter. After all, the serial's original tagline was, "whatever, whenever." I feel like that's pretty much everything you need to know right there.

Jesse Gordon
San Angelico, California
May 2024

For Bill Watterson—
to this day
I still can't decide
if I want to be
Spaceman Spiff
or Tracer Bullet
when I grow up.

# The Guidance Counselor from Hell

**@thrailkill**

You can kiss your respective summers goodbye.

Because it's the first day of school.

Which means it's the first day of the end of your lives, my little ones.

Even at this early morning hour, this preliminary juncture, the worst is obvious: forced smiles on swollen faces, looks of uncertainty and alienation clouding bright eyes, expressions of anger and resentment directed at seemingly oblivious mommies and daddies—"You wretched scoundrel! How can you just leave me here?! I was an eighth grader! I was at the top of my game! No one stepped up to me, I was a god!"

And now you're crap. Toilet scum. Barnacles clinging to the underside of a social Titanic, cursed to begin the hellish uphill climb that is high school. You don't want to be here. Sure, you've heard the stories of scamming behind the bleachers, smoking in the restroom, scandalous cheerleader slumber parties, midnight raves—but you know as well as I do, my little darlings, that you shall be denied any of these more heady teenage pleasures. You four are the exceptions, the anomalies, exiles, outcasts prematurely ejected from your previous schools because of three painful commonalities: you're twelve years old, you're *gifted*, and you're freshmen here at Boca Linda High. You're terrified, shaking in your sneakers. Without proper guidance you'll spend the next four years of your lives leaning on your various crutches in a vain attempt to scrape by.

Let's start with you. Theo Ivanovich. Brown hair, brown eyes, glasses, small and darling—for now (puberty almost certainly has a few cruel tricks in store for you). You're the smart kid, aren't you? You *look* smart. Smart and worrisome. Worrywart. That's what you are. Worried about your first day, your first grade, whether or not the cafeteria provides vegetarian alternatives to chicken-fried steak and cheeseburgers. You're wondering if you'll have to share your locker with a putz, if you'll have to shower naked with the older, bigger boys after each and every godforsaken gym class. You're worried that despite this being a smoke-free campus, I have a full ashtray on my desk. Well, the campus may be smoke-free, but this room is *my* domain. Has been for thirty years. Know why? Because I get the job done. No beating around the bush in *my* office.

Moving along: Ernest Goodale. The fat kid. Curly brown locks, perennially matted—hat hair. You've got girth, I'll give you that, but I doubt it'll do more than earn you a barrage of fat jokes as you struggle to convince everyone you're merely

"big boned." You're looking at me with a carefully-trained expression of detached contempt, as if you've got better things to do besides sit in some old hag's smoke-filled cave while she picks you apart piece by piece. The sad part is, you *don't* have anything better to do. You're twelve years old. Between school and Internet time at home (most of which you no doubt spend gaming or looking at free adult site previews), there's nothing going on in your life. Too old to be amused by kiddie pastimes, too young to be of interest to your female contemporaries. And you're *fat*.

Jan Kounicova. The foreigner—and the poor kid, from the look of you. Tall for your age. Everything slightly tattered—even the hairdo, with its frizzy-not-spiky dollar store blond dye job. I'll admit, you're a looker, with those broad features and cute muscles of yours. If you had an ounce of self-assurance (and if your parents could afford it), you'd make a good football player, but you can't keep eye contact for more than three seconds at a time. You might fit in with the jocks except for the fact that you have a girl's name. I don't care if it's "John" in Brno; in America, Jan is short for Janet. Get used to being a closet jock.

Eva Taylor. The girl. Blond. Ponytail. Jogging suit. Brand new sneakers. Pretty and petite, albeit noticeably bug-eyed. Like Jan, you're sporty. However, where he probably got his physique out of necessity, walking four miles to and from school everyday, it's obvious you're the product of teenybopper parents raised on an abundance of fresh salads and 24-Hour Fitness memberships. Valley girl in the making, not yet annoying, as you're still flat-chested and conservative with the makeup. Could go both ways once the boys start to take notice, though. I'd say there's nothing outright *wrong* with you except that you've suffered the grave misfortune of being lumped together with the Runt Squad. Obviously it's of vital importance to your parents that they keep an open channel between themselves and their daughter's educators. God, I *hate* socialites.

So, yes, children, it's the first day of school, and I, Mrs. Rebbecca Thrailkill, am your guidance counselor.

I'm going to need another cigarette.

# Mrs. Thrailkill is a Chain Smoker

**@theo**

The lights are dim. The room is filled with cigarette smoke. This isn't the counseling office, I think to myself, it's the back room of a pool hall. The other kids are sitting next to me and giving me questioning looks as they fill out their questionnaires.

*What did we do wrong?* they're no doubt thinking.

I cough. Secondhand smoke'll kill you worse than smoking the actual cigarette, but Mrs. Thrailkill doesn't seem to care. She just sits there watching us squirm, smiling crookedly, a smoldering butt in her hand. The ashtray on her desk is overflowing.

"Psst."

One of the others is trying to get my attention. He's fat, wearing this ridiculous-looking T-shirt that has "Empire Slam" printed on it. Underneath, a basketball player is slam-dunking his own head. His name's Ernest, as I recall from when Thrailkill made us all shake hands. (Beside him, the bodybuilder boy with the accent and the jogging suit girl are sitting quietly. The girl is sneaking glances at the boy, but he doesn't seem to notice.)

"Yeah?" I whisper, trying to look buggered.

"What's this mean?" Ernest asks, and points to one of the questions on his worksheet.

I glance down at the paper, recognizing the question about going steady. "These things are for kids who are older than us. Just put 'yes' if you've been dating anyone for more than a month."

"Oh." Ernest snickers. "I knew that."

I can tell he's lying, but I don't say anything. I'm trying to breathe as slowly as possible, trying to pretend my lungs aren't being smoked like a Christmas ham.

After several minutes of silence, we turn in our worksheets. Mrs. Thrailkill slides them into a folder.

"Let's be honest, shall we?" She folds her hands on the desktop. "You four are in over your heads. Good grades might have gotten you here, but if you're going to stay, there's going to have to be some sort of adjustment. Academics are no substitute for a natural evolution of social skills that can only be acquired through incremental leverage against your peers—but seeing as how you've skipped past your middle school careers, we're going to need to use alternative measures."

"What are you saying?" asks Jan. "Are we autistic or something?" He seems

genuinely concerned, though he somehow does it without once looking Thrailkill in the eye.

She smiles, takes a drag from her cigarette. *Oh, the upperclassmen are going to eat you up!* her expression reads. "No—although that *is* a charming scenario."

Eva pipes in: "Then...you're saying we're, um, socially-challenged?"

"In a way, yes, though it's not of your own doing. You're intelligent, privileged in the academic sense. But you're also much younger than the other freshmen. They can't help but look at the lot of you as junior siblings, lackeys, nuisances. You're either going to get in the way, or you're going to be ignored completely. In the adolescent world, there is no middle ground. So, yes, in that sense, you're socially-challenged."

Ernest laughs nervously and shakes his head. "Did you call us in here just to scare us?"

"I'm not telling you anything you wouldn't find out on your own if given a few weeks to bumble around here at Boca Linda. My job is to prepare you, to prime you, to alleviate any false assumptions regarding free blowjobs in the boys' restroom."

Did...did she just say *blowjobs*?

"Hmf," Ernest snorts. Half amazed, half grossed-out.

Thrailkill pauses a moment, looks us over, amusement playing across her weathered features. I think she's waiting for one of us to say something—but just as I clear my throat she finishes her cigarette and says, "I have an idea." She picks up a ballpoint pen and scribbles something in her notepad. "Do you four have Internet access at home?"

We all nod.

"Good." She turns away, starts rummaging in her file cabinet.

"Dude," Ernest breathes into my ear—a disturbing feeling considering we've only just met. "She's just like everyone said. Worse, even."

I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose. "You think it's legal for her to be smoking in here?"

"I wouldn't worry about *that*. I heard she has five husbands, and they all live in her garden shed. She keeps them locked up, and she feeds them table scraps once a day."

"That's obviously an urban legend," I whisper.

Ernest shrugs. "I thought having a chain-smoking guidance counselor was an urban legend too, but here we are."

I look at Thrailkill again. She looks like a man-eater. Must be six feet tall, with a formidable bone structure that's held up well considering the fact that she must be approaching sixty.

She faces us again.

Eva is caught halfway to asking Ernest and me what we're whispering about.

We straighten, mouths shut, palms tingling.

"I have a homework assignment for you," says Thrailkill.

An instinctive groan escapes Ernest's mouth.

"Rest assured, Mr. Goodale, it won't affect your dinner schedule."

Eva smiles, shoots Jan a knowing look (which he misses).

"Your assignment, children, is to spend half an hour chatting with each other online. I want you each to learn five useful facts about your companions, and I want you to write them down. You can make a list or do a paragraph including what you've learned. You'll turn this in when we meet again tomorrow."

I glance at the others, trying to be nonchalant. Ernest is annoying; he acts like he's already friends with me. Jan just looks like he'd rather be anywhere else than here. Eva is kind of bug-eyed, but cute (I wonder how she answered the "going steady" part of her questionnaire?). I don't see how we'd ever have a reason to spend a single minute talking to one another, much less *thirty* minutes. But that's the assignment, and Mrs. Thrailkill is already handing us our hall passes and telling us "good day."

We leave the counseling office; a cloud of acrid smoke follows us out, hovers over our heads as we exchange screen names.

"How did you like Mrs. Thrill-Kill?" asks Ernest.

"I can't *believe* she's our counselor," replies Eva.

"I can't believe she's a counselor—period," I say.

Jan nods, plays with a rogue thread on his sleeve.

We look at each other a moment. I know I want to say "goodbye," or "nice meeting you," or something like that, but I don't want to sound *too* friendly. So, I nod, wave, and part ways with my assigned partners, my predetermined friends.

My social life has been handed to me; I don't know if I should be relieved, or if this is the start of something truly awful.

# Byte Me

**@ernie**

Oh, my God. Look at that absolutely perfect rack.

*Click.*

And that absolutely flat tummy, those gently flared thighs.

*Click.*

And that absolutely delectable—

"Hi, Ernest."

Theo's head and shoulders pop up on my screen, obscuring my view of busty_bare_bimbos_gallery_2.html. "It's Theo, from school. Are you up for Mrs. Thrailkill's assignment?"

Thrailkill! Who does that carcinogenic bitch think she is, anyway? Telling me who to *collaborate* with! "I know who you are, Theo." I wipe my brow before turning on my webcam.

"Oh, sorry," Theo says, looking apologetic as soon as he sees me. "Did you just get out of the shower?"

Jesus, am I sweating that profusely? "Yeah. No big deal."

I wait, alt-tabbing between Theo's window and the bimbo gallery. He's saying something about how he's looking forward to working with me and the others, but I'm not really listening. I try to nod at regular intervals, though, give him the impression that I'm not being a jerk. When Eva joins, I arrange her and Theo on the periphery of my screen, allowing my Web browser prime real-estate in the center. They talk to each other for a few minutes, and a balance is struck between me, my bimbos, and my study buddies. Jan ruins this, however, by popping up right where my favorite college cheerleader's crotch is peeking out from under her miniskirt. Needless to say, my mojo is lost. Trampled. Wilted. I close my browser window—but not before bookmarking the bimbo site.

Sorry ladies, but I have to make *friends* tonight.

"All right," I say, grabbing pen and paper. "How do we start this thing?"

"I'll go first," Theo offers.

"Wait," says Eva. "Do we, like, have each of us offer five things about herself, and everyone carbon-copies to their list? Or do we each have to learn five *different* things about each other person?"

"Eff that," I say. "Fifteen facts per person? I don't think any of us is that interesting."

"Speak for yourself," I hear Eva grumble, though by the time I look at her

screen she's smiling that way girls do after they've dispensed with something "witty."

"I don't think Mrs. Thrailkill really meant for us to do hardcore research," says Theo. "It's probably just something she has students like us do—an exercise. Busywork."

I agree. Thrailkill must die. "Right. I say we treat this like a book report: first and last paragraph are genuine, middle three are filler."

Eva rolls her eyes. "Geez, aren't you three *lazy*."

Jan looks like he wants to defend himself, but is too shy to speak up.

I decide to break the ice. "So, Jan, what's with the girl's name?"

"My name's pronounced *Yawn*," he corrects. "The J sounds like a Y."

"Oh. You Lithuanian or something?"

"Czech."

"I thought you said you were from Brno."

"I am. I moved to the United States two years ago."

"But Brno's the capital of Switzerland, isn't it?"

"You're thinking of *Bern*," Theo says. I can tell he wants to add "stupid," but catches himself in time.

"Can we get started?" asks Eva, looking anxious. "I don't want to spend my entire evening sitting in front of the computer."

Girls. The flatter the chest, the more annoying the rest. "Fine. Take it away, Theo."

Theo clears his throat, adjusts his glasses, and looks thoughtful for a moment. "Um...my name's Theo Ivanovich. I'm twelve years old. I like to read manga, and my favorite band is, um, Asia. My mom's an aromatherapist and homeopathic doctor who works out of our house."

*There's* a surprise, I think to myself, noting Theo's porcelain-smooth skin. Not a single blemish, thanks to his witch-doctor mommy. I'm not jealous, though. Not much. "And you, Eva?"

"I'm twelve years old. My last name is Taylor. I like to make video scrapbooks in my spare time. My dad's in construction. My mom runs a flower shop. I'm also on the wrestling team."

"You can't wrestle!" I blurt, innocently enough. "You're a girl!"

Eva scowls at me. "I could take *you* down."

Theo chuckles.

Jan smirks.

I glare at him. "Okay, your turn, *Czech*."

I scrutinize his screen as he starts talking—I realize for the first time how choppy the video is. Five frames per second, max.

"Wait, *wait*," I say, interrupting.

Jan stops, stares.

"Dude, I can *not* look at your messenger window. It's giving me headaches."

"What's wrong with my window?" Jan asks.

"It's the equivalent of a slide show."

"Are you on dial-up?" asks Theo.

"DSL," Jan responds.

"Who's your provider?"

"Um...DXL Pro, I think."

"Ugh," I mutter. I've heard of DXL, and they suck brussel sprouts. "You need to upgrade to cable."

Jan snorts. "Why? Are you paying?"

"Why? Are you poor?"

Eva looks like she just wet herself. "How mean—"

Theo, evidently trying to be helpful, cuts in: "We could try different conferencing software. Maybe something with better compression."

I nod, opening my browser and clicking my bimbos bookmark. "Good idea, Theo. You look for a new video chat program, and when you find it, give us a holler."

"Let's *all* look," Eva sighs, "and whoever finds something that looks suitable, send everyone else the URL. Okay?"

Theo is quick to agree. I can tell he's already got a thing for Eva. The poor bastard, he doesn't realize she's way out of his league, one of those well-to-do girls who, despite her bug eyes, becomes a football player's squeeze the very instant she turns sixteen. I know the score. Girls our age don't want boys; they want men. Period. That leaves us junior guys with two options: naughty substitute teachers, or Internet porn.

I want to tell everyone I have better things to do (which I do), and not only because I get ornery when I don't keep to my usual Internet schedule...but I can take one for the team if it'll get Thrill-Kill off my case. And, truthfully, it's not so bad having some new peeps to add to the ol' buddy list. I mean, I have friends from middle school, too many, if you ask me (you don't believe me? Screw you, then!), but it's convenient to have skipped over the preliminary socializing process at Boca Linda—even if it's resulted in a nerd-jock-fatso-*gurl* combo. Hey, I'm a realist.

I click over to softpedia.com, do a search, skim the results. At first, the candidates aren't promising—

—then I see it.

"Hey, everyone," I say. "I found a program! Sending the link right now."

Theo scowls when he sees the name. "*SuperMegaNet*?"

"Hellz yeah! It's both *super* and *mega*!"

"It's still in beta, though."

"Yeah, but look at the features. 'Real-time, real-world conversation; automatic bandwidth optimization; superior transmission technology—you're in the same room with your friends! SuperMegaNet: Ultimate Collaboration!'"

"Those are all vague terms. It sounds like vaporware."

"Vaporware?" asks Jan.

"Yeah," says Theo. "A work-in-progress that's mediocre, or even crappy. The developers announce it way ahead of time to drum up buzz. They make false promises and use all these vague or confusing terms to make their product sound

alluring..."

Theo's voice turns to white noise in my head as I double-click the SuperMegaNet installer. That's Theo's problem, see? He thinks too much, whereas I use my thinking as a garnish on my actions. Keeps things moving. Theo is probably one of those kids who holds up the cafeteria line while trying to decide between chicken nuggets and chicken-fried steak. He'd never get anywhere in life without someone like me moving him along.

"Okay, everyone have their crap installed?" I ask once the InstallShield wizard has completed.

"Yeah," chime Jan and Eva in unison.

"Good...so what's this 'visitor' and 'host' jargon?"

Theo looks disgruntled, but gives in to mob rule, installing the SuperMegaNet program and reading the instructions. "It says one of us has to serve as 'host' to everyone else—one of us will be the host, and the rest will be the visitors. Like, a server/client sort of thing."

I laugh, skimming over the README file that's appeared on my screen. "It says the host has to have enough room for all his guests, so don't invite like thirty people if you don't think they'll fit in your board room, office, living room, bedroom, or whatever."

"That's dumb-speak," says Theo. "It probably has to do with RAM and bandwidth and all that. If you have too many people in the same chat room the connection gets sluggish. We should be fine, though."

"I don't know about Jan," I say, forgetting to pronounce the J as a Y. "His connection really *sucks*."

"I *get* it," Jan says. He rolls his eyes.

Theo holds up his hands, mediator-style. "Let's just try this SuperMegaNet thing. Who wants to be host?"

"Why don't you be the host?" asks Eva. "Your video looks the smoothest."

"Okay, then." Theo does some clicking. He nods. "Up and running. My room is called #theos_place."

*How original,* I think. "I'll go first, 'kay?"

Theo and Eva nod; Jan shrugs. I look at my shiny new messenger window, which is pretty darned basic. There's an input field and a button; above, there's a pull-down menu labeled, "Transmission Quality." I choose "high quality / broadband." I enter Theo's room name and click "Visit."

Nothing happens.

After a moment, a message window pops up: "Error: You must be standing upright before transfer can begin."

"Crud." I knew there'd be some troubleshooting involved sooner or later—there always is.

"What's the matter?" asks Eva.

"Nothing," I reply, clicking the visit button again...and again. Both times the program reminds me to stand up, as well as to make sure my webcam is pointed directly at me. I get to my feet, start to say something about crudware—

—and then it happens. I start to feel all tingly, head to toe. My vision blurs, everything becoming pixelated; for a moment I feel like cotton candy being pulled apart by a dozen eager hands (which is weird, because I've never been cotton candy before—but I'm absolutely sure this is what it feels like). Next: a frizzy sweater being knitted at light-speed by a grandmother on acid just before she runs out of thread and tosses me onto the floor in a fit of rage—

—Theo is standing over me. His eyes are boggling.

"How the hell did you get into my bedroom...?" I begin, but trail off when I realize *I'm* the one trespassing in *his* room.

*His room!*

I get to my feet, shaking all over. I glance here and there, see Asia posters, CD racks, book cases, some kind of bonsai plant in the corner, a Chinese lantern, everything too neat and clean—

"No...frippin'...way..." I breathe. I'm not a Trekkie; I think science fiction is bunk (well, it is), but I swear to God I'm telling the truth when I say I've somehow transported into Theo's bedroom!

Theo doesn't look too sure.

In fact, I think he's just messed himself.

## SuperMegaNet

**@jan**

It's a joke. It's got to be a joke. I'm the new guy, new in town, new to the States—do they think that means I'm flat-out dumb? Computers can't just transport you to other people's homes. But there they are, Theo and Ernest, in the same frame together, yelling at me and Eva to join in. Well, Ernest is doing all the yelling; Theo's putting on this stunned-silent act. He's standing frozen behind Ernest.

"Holy crap!" Ernest gasps, his bulk taking up most of the screen as he babbles away. "What are you guys waiting for? You *have* to try this out!"

Eva sends me a private text message: WTH?

I don't know what to tell her. I don't think I like Ernest. I don't think he likes me, what with the way he keeps pronouncing my name with a hard "J" sound, the way he called me *Czech* earlier. And now this idiotic ploy to make a fool out of me in front of everyone else. It makes me wonder about the American socializing process. In Brno, people go about their business, not really talking to each other on the street. Tourists probably think we're being rude, when really we're just being efficient. In America, everyone's always saying "hello," or "good day," or "how's it going?" every few steps. Everything's okay if you just nod or say "hi," but if you actually *talk* to these people, they start looking flustered, glancing at their wristwatches and acting like they have to be somewhere else. So, I know there's a trick to Americans—a do-but-don't kind of thing. I just have to figure out the nuances.

Ernest yells at us again.

"Computers can't do that," I say.

Eva agrees, verbally and in text.

"Are you *blind* as well as Czech?" Ernest grabs Theo by the shoulders, shakes him like a rag doll. There's a thin trail of drool trickling down Theo's chin; he seems to have broken into a sweat. "Look! I'm *in* Theo's bedroom!"

I want no part of the joke. "That just proves you brought over your laptop for your little sleepover."

"I don't *have* a laptop!"

"Fine." I fold my arms. "Transport Eva."

Eva frowns. "You guys are being stupid."

She sounds like she's on my side, but there's still the chance she's in on the scheme. I politely suggest that she go next, ladies first and all that. If she appears in Ernest's video window, then I'll know she's in on it. They're having a co-ed

sleepover or something (how in the world did Theo get his parents to agree to *that*?), and they want to haze the new guy.

"Eva!" Ernest says. "Theo tinkled himself—you've *got* to see this!"

"I did not!" Theo retorts, finally snapping out of his reverie and frowning. "I spilled my tea when your fat behind came tumbling into the room!"

"Your tea? You drink *tea*?"

"Guys," Eva interrupts, "we should be working on our assignment—"

"This *is* the assignment!" Ernest screams.

"Dude!" Theo screams, equally as loud. "Lower your voice! If my parents see what's going on...well, I don't know *what* they'd say!"

Ernest waves him away, frames himself in an extreme close-up. "Okay, Eva, just stand up and click 'Visit!'"

Eva sighs, standing. "Fine. Whatever. Jan, let's just play along so that we can get this over with and do some actual *work*."

"Agreed." I stand, too. Me and Eva click the visit button at the same time—at least, I think we do. For a moment nothing happens, and I'm about to sit back down—but then I see her start to dissolve. And when I say dissolve, I mean she's really *dissolving*! Disappearing! Vanishing from head to toe!

But that's the least of my worries, for I'm slipping between myself, into an all-encompassing mosaic of pixels.

And it tickles.

And I'm laughing, shouting, crying: "Quit it, quit it, quit it!"

Forever.

Or, more likely, for just a few minutes.

I don't realize what's happened until I've downloaded (from top to bottom, like a Web image) completely. I'm standing alongside the others in some kind of pristine Zen garden, a bedroom that's not my own, a shrine to Asia (the band), Asia (the culture), *feng shui*, tapestries, bonsai—it's the cleanest, most perfectly organized room I've ever been in.

"*Můj bože!*" I gasp, looking at Theo, Ernest, and Eva—all of whom suddenly grow quiet.

Someone has pulled down my pants.

But, again, that's the least of my worries.

"Oh, Jan!" cries Eva.

"You're..." Theo adds.

"...even frizzier than usual!" finishes Ernest. He laughs. "Freakin' DSL. I *told* you your connection sucks."

Panic grips me as I pull up my pants, and not just because everyone has seen my underwear. I hold out my hands, which are marred by artifacts. I look like a poorly-compressed JPEG. My voice sounds like a low-bitrate MP3. "Oh, *no*! What am I going to do? I can't stay like this! What if somebody sees me? My parents—"

Ernest covers my mouth with his hand. "Relax. We'll figure it out. Isn't this cool though?"

I try to yell "No!" but Ernest's hand muffles the sound.

"How do you feel?" Eva asks, poking my arm with her finger.

"How do you *think* I feel?"

"Like you're made of dirty Legos?" suggests Ernest.

In the background, Theo has locked his bedroom door, and is pulling a beanbag out from the closet. He sets it on the floor and, smiling shyly, offers Eva a seat. Then he sits at his computer, says, "Let me check the help file. There's probably something in here about, er, compression and all that."

I can tell he's worried.

Ernest, on the other hand, is making himself at home, questioning nothing and no one as he lets me go, thoroughly explores his new environment. He flips through Theo's manga, pokes through his CD racks, plays with his Chinese lamp. Maybe he's trying to keep casual for my benefit—keep me calm by acting nonchalant. Or maybe it's ADD. I mean, he just *teleported* across town, and yet he's acting like...well, I guess he's acting like someone who's in shock after teleporting across town.

Eva comes to stand beside me. "This is *so* freaky!"

I grunt. "You mean me, or the overall SuperMegaNet concept?"

"Both." She feels my arm again, as if she's sampling a piece of fabric. "Does it hurt? Does everything sound fuzzy?"

Now that she mentions it, I *do* feel different. Soft. Thick. "Not really," I say, shrugging, wishing she'd stop focusing solely on my predicament. I'm not *worried* just yet (my brain is still trying to separate fact from fantasy)—but I'm close.

Luckily, Theo seems to have found what he's looking for.

"I see what's happened," he says as everyone gathers around his desk. "It says here that when you use SuperMegaNet a high quality, uncompressed version of yourself is stored on your computer, but to save bandwidth on computers with slow Internet connections—"

"Like Jan's," Ernest interrupts.

I frown at him.

"—the default setting is to upload a down-sampled version of yourself. However, pixelation and/or artifacting is only temporary and is reversed when you return to your home computer. 'You can override this at any time via the Preferences dialog. If you have any questions, please contact our tech support using the provided feedback form, and we will get back to you as soon as possible.'"

"Oh, so *that's* all it is," sighs Ernest—as if he's known all along.

Eva claps excitedly.

Theo nods, doing some more clicking. His SuperMegaNet window looks a little different than mine, with the addition of "Send Home" buttons next to his guests' names. "So, I'll just send you back home. You can fix your settings and re-upload again. Might take longer, but you should look and sound just like Ernest and Eva."

I stand straight, realizing in the back of my mind that I've become a test subject for the SuperMegaNet company. Lucky me. "I'm ready—but don't any of you touch my pants this time, okay?"

Ernest holds up his hands, takes a step back.

Theo sends me home. The trip tickles me just as badly as before, but I'm ready for it, and when I'm back in the soft glow of my parents' living room, I stifle a triumphant shout. I'm whole again! On my computer screen, Ernest and Eva are cheering while Theo desperately calls for some kind of order—

"Oh, Jan, there you are."

I quickly sober as my dad passes through the living room on his way into the kitchen. "Sure, *tatínek*. What's up?"

"Nothing. Thought you'd gone out for a jog."

"*Ne*. Just doing some homework."

My dad nods, ruffles his thinning hair, which is prematurely salt-and-pepper. "That's good. How's the new school?"

"It's okay," I reply, scooting deftly over to my desk and minimizing the SuperMegaNet window. "I made some friends."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. They're kind of weird, but...we're managing."

Smiling, my dad continues on into the kitchen. I stand still for a moment, listening to him talk about this and that as he rummage in the freezer. I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I wish he'd just hole up in his room with mom for the night. The computer is out here, in the living room. So's my bed, my things. My family lives in a single bedroom apartment; my parents get the bedroom, and I get the living room. It's usually not a problem—unless I'm uploading myself to friends' houses via unbelievably cool freeware. Regardless, this is supposed to be *my* room.

I sigh, sitting at my computer and toying with the mouse. I wonder what would happen if my parents come out and I'm gone? If they turn the computer off while I'm at Theo's, will I have to walk home? Would it be me walking home, or would it be a *copy*, so that the next time I upload myself I'll be making a copy of a copy?

Thankfully, my dad's only getting a glass of water. He heads back to the bedroom, waving to me and telling me goodnight. I return the favor, listen for the sound of the bedroom door closing—and then I spring into action, rummaging for a shirt and socks. I sit at my desk and open the SuperMegaNet preferences dialog. There are compression options there; I choose "lossless," click "save," and bring up my messenger window. Theo is still sitting at his desk, with Eva and Ernest standing behind him (Ernest has acquired a box of cookies and is snacking away; he gives me a thumbs-up). With one last glance over my shoulder, I click the visit button.

It takes a full ten minutes this time. However, when I'm done, I'm just like the others: no fuzz, no frizz. And instead of just chatting with the people on my buddy list, I'm actually *visiting* them.

Ernest high-fives me, offers me a cookie from his box of fat-free SnackWell's. I wolf it down—SuperMegaNet has given me a voracious appetite!

"So..." says Theo, swiveling around in his chair and grinning ear to ear. "What now?"

"Friends!" exclaims Ernest. "Movie stars! Supermodels! Fluffs! We're going to have the coolest buddy lists in the world!"

"What about our homework assignment?" asks Eva.

"Yeah, yeah," says Ernest with a dismissive wave of his hand. He gathers everyone into a circle; there are crumbs in his hair (how the heck do you get cookie crumbs in your *hair*?). "We'll get to that. First: a pact. With awesome power comes awesome responsibility. We must use our newfound beta freeware wisely and efficiently. Above all, we must *not* tell our parents."

"Why not?" asks Theo.

Ernest scowls. "What happens when you find twenty dollars lying in the street? You're told to donate it to charity. What happens when your dad catches you downloading MP3s off the Internet? He tells you not steal and switches you to a limited computer account. What happens when a nice man drives up alongside you in a van and asks if you want some candy? Your mom tells you to say *no*!"

Okay, so the candy analogy is stupid—Ernest nevertheless has a point. My parents are okay with me chatting online, as well as maintaining a MySpace profile, but I can just imagine what they would say if they knew I now had the ability to physically interact with my online friends: "Oh, I don't know about this, Jan," or, "You know how uninhibited those online folk can be." Not that I have any intention of taking cyber-crime-and-or-sex to the next level. This is just a really, really cool development, and I don't want it to end before it's begun.

I excitedly place my hand atop the others'. I mean, as Ernest originally pointed out, this is super, it's mega, and even though it's been the strangest first day of school I've ever had, I'm loving every minute of it.

# Tips for 2:00 A.M.

**@theo**

Yummy.

It's two in the morning and I'm laying sprawled on my bed with a case of the tossy-turnies.

But I'm also sitting in a chair at the center of my bedroom. There are images flickering between the shadows, sounds echoing between my ears. I think I'm asleep...or else I'm hallucinating. Maybe a little of both. Someone—Ernest's afterimage, perhaps—is putting on a record, which is strange because I don't own a turntable.

"You Can Do Magic," by America, starts playing.

I try to say, "Quit touching my stuff, Ernest." Instead, it comes out, "Quee touth mm sluh, Unsth."

Ernest crouches beside me, gives me a wet willy. "I told you to call me *Ernie*."

Damn it. He's getting crumbs on my floor. I can see them now as they dance across the room. I want to clean them up, but I can't be bothered. I'm certain now that I'm not yet fully asleep but caught in that funhouse of the mind that often accompanies being not-quite-awake at two in the morning. I get like this often. I've always been a finicky sleeper. Half of any given night is usually spent staving off much-needed REM. In effect, I'm power-napping, but not actually *sleeping*.

It's ticking me off. Why can't I just take sleeping pills? Oh, that's right, they're not *natural*. My mom's already had this discussion with me. She's a homeopath. Herbs, aromatherapy, and acupuncture are her tools of the trade. She's been practicing *natural* on me for twelve years and the best she can come up with is cognitive behavioral therapy. CBT.

Learning the hard way.

I sigh. It's just like a finger puzzle, I tell myself: the harder I try to sleep, the more agitated I become. But if I let the imagery distract me from *trying* to fall asleep, if I concentrate on *not* concentrating...well, you see why I sometimes wish I could pop some pills and be done with it. Tricky stuff.

For now, I convince myself I'm watching a movie. The chair beneath me reshapes itself into a plush recliner; the furniture in my room has been fitted with wheels—everything is flat as cardboard, like cheap props in a high school play. My things are wheeled away, replaced with Ernie's things: bed, dresser, numerous shelves stacked with *Maxim* magazines, bottle caps, baseball cards, Carl's Jr. plastic tickets, movie theater stubs. On the floor: forgotten underwear, socks, potato chip

bags, candy wrappers, and, ironically, an unopened copy of P90X. I laugh, remembering how funny it was the first time I saw it.

"You know darn well," Ernie lip-syncs angrily, "when you cast your spell you will get your way..."

Jan and Eva look at each other and shrug. They step out of the way, for the invisible stagehands are at it again. Ernie's room is wheeled away, everything replaced with hanging tinsel. I'm lifted out of my seat and dangled in mid-air so that my torso is at the mercy of the tinsel (which reaches easily from ceiling to floor). I realize this is supposed to be a mock-up of what it was like uploading into Jan's room. It tickles so much and for so long that I think I'm going to die, but eventually it fades, the tinsel is removed, and the backdrop is replaced with a small living room. There's a futon, desk, and dresser arranged as a makeshift partition in one corner. Thankfully, the tickling fades just as Ernie and the others appear alongside me.

"Poor people," Ernie says, lifting an entire cheesecake to his lips and nibbling vigorously. "Talk about saving the worst for last."

Okay, so I'm pretty sure the cheesecake is an exaggeration. The scattered retro bikini babe pics cluttering Jan's desktop, however, aren't.

"Dude," I say, holding up a half-wrinkled black and white print-out and reading the caption. "Who're all the oldschool models?"

"Give me that!" Jan cries, yanking the sheet from my hand.

Ernie snorts, spewing graham cracker crust onto Jan's computer monitor. "Wow. Creepy, but cost-effective jack-off material."

Jan is lobster-red. Hastily filing his big-haired beauties away, he clears his throat and says, "Can we please stick to the assignment?"

"Relax. This is all fact-gathering—hey, look, everyone! Jan's a closet jock!" Ernie struggles to lift one of Jan's dumbbells, but gives up when his arm falls off.

I know I'm dreaming, so I laugh hysterically.

"That's not nice," Eva says, slapping my shoulder. She bends over to help Ernie re-attach his arm.

I have to look away, lest my eyes pop out of their sockets. I was never any good with horror movies—even the cheesy ones. Luckily my brain has relaxed to the point where shifting from thought to thought isn't a problem. I blink once, find that I'm standing over my bathroom sink and brushing my teeth. Everyone else has called it a night—well, everyone but Ernie, who's uploaded himself behind my back and who's now standing behind me in his bathrobe.

He wants to know if he can borrow some toothpaste.

I shoo him away, sending him back home and turning off my computer. I make a mental note to upload into his house tomorrow and replace his box of SnackWell's with a bag of fresh carrots. Or, better yet, I'll sneak over and mess with his SMN settings so that the next time he uploads he'll be all pixelated, like Jan. No! Even *better*, I'll replace his *Maxim* collection with issues of my mom's *Cooking Light*...

And that's how I fall asleep this crazy, crazy morning: thinking up things to do

to unsuspecting friends who are but a click away.

Cognitive behavioral therapy—it works.

# The Morning After

**@eva**

It could have been much worse. I mean, being grouped together with three idiotic boys to collaborate on homework assigned by a foul-mouthed, chain-smoking guidance counselor *should* have resulted in a total disaster. On any other day in any other town, it would have been a skewered reiteration of the obvious fact that the four of us are "gifted" and in dire need of lives. But we've beaten the odds. We've bypassed all that is awkward and uncomfortable about the First Day of School—and in a way that has completely changed my regard toward computers. I mean, I've heard of Moore's law, I know the power of modern-day computer circuits is increasing exponentially, but a program that can turn people's webcams into teleportation devices—that's genius. Inconceivable. As mind-boggling as it was a hundred years ago to imagine that one day entire symphonies would be stored on cheap plastic discs.

SuperMegaNet is that next amazing thing. I don't know how it works, but it does. I was there. In Theo's home and, later, in Ernie's...in Jan's. And now I'm back at school, blinking in the dim, smoky light of Mrs. Thrailkill's office as she goes over our questionnaires. My ordinary, everyday life has become a dream within a dream. I don't think I mind. I don't think any of us minds. Each of us is tired, swollen from lack of sleep, but nevertheless beaming as we sit and wait. We've gotten to know each other by now, and not just because we finished our paper assignment. That came later, once each of us had finally returned home (I actually scribbled in my answers during breakfast). The *real* assignment lay in the populating of our respective buddy lists. I filled mine with friends from my old school: Susie, Summer, Maria, and Lily. The SMN "invite" feature let me e-mail each of the girls a copy of the installer. Once they got past the "this is a prank, isn't it?" phase, they added me, too, and set up dates and places where we could meet in person. Theo did the same with several of his friends; Ernie (I know his name is Ernest, but he's cool with the nickname—and besides, his maturity level is more "Ernie" than "Ernest") and Jan followed suit.

Oh, Jan. I think of him now, tuning out whatever Mrs. Thrailkill is saying as I recall last night. For a moment I'm back in Theo's bedroom. We're all dressed down for the night. Sadly, Jan has put a shirt on. I felt so bad when Ernie pulled his pants down, but I enjoyed it, too. I mean, he *really* looks good all over, and I'm replaying the memory back in my head every chance I get. The whole night Theo's being really nice to me, probably because I'm the girl. He seems to have some sort

of obligation to put me on a pedestal—it's flattering and annoying, and I find myself mostly ignoring him, mostly watching Jan. I can do this uninterrupted because Theo's parents respect his privacy—but he's a boy. I'm my daddy's little girl, so I'm always being checked on, my dad sticking his head inside my bedroom at regular intervals and asking me, "How's my little girl?" I always have to pretend I'm doing homework. It's a hassle, and I wonder how I'm going to manage my SMN time without getting caught.

For now I'm allowing the risks. You'd do the same if you were me. At midnight I tell everyone goodnight, and download myself back home. It feels naughty, like I'm swimming naked in a pool full of ice cubes—not that I've ever done anything like that before. And not that I'm a prude either. I have nothing against those old people who run the nudist camp down at Moon River. Swimming naked in a pool filled with ice cubes is merely an approximation. I wouldn't mind if Jan were with me.

I can't believe what I'm about to do. I don't even know why I'm doing it, sitting here at the computer in my mind's eye, physically at school but mentally curled up among the dozen or so life-sized *The Nightmare Before Christmas* dolls that fill my bedroom. I'm watching, waiting for Jan to return home. When he does, I totally feel like a voyeur; he leaves his webcam on as he strips down to his undies and plops himself into bed. I don't mean to wait for him to fall asleep before clicking "Visit." My goal is some kind of spontaneous moment between the two of us, alone together, apart from the others, maybe talking about the whole SuperMegaNet thing, maybe holding hands...maybe kissing. But it's such a monumental aspiration I wind up frozen in place, watching and waiting and wondering until at last my finger twitches of its own accord, and I download to Jan's place way past the point.

At first I think I'm in a large bedroom, but then I realize it's a living room—Jan's room is his parents' living room. He has a futon tucked beside a small desk, with a dresser acting as a makeshift privacy screen (his parents get the bedroom, I'm guessing). I stand very still; my eyes adjust to the darkness, and I can see him laying there tucked into bed.

And my goodness. The Internet has brought out the worst in me. Here I am standing over a sleeping boy I've just met, watching him with his arms around his pillow, wishing he was cuddling with me instead. I have to force myself to look away. *Go back home*, I tell myself. *This isn't right*.

In the glow of his computer screen I can make out the murky details of Jan's space. There are dumbbells on the floor beside his backpack. I move closer to the desk and spot a variety of bodybuilding magazines stacked atop a dozen or so black and white printouts of naked and nearly-naked retro supermodels. Ernie had made fun of his affinity for "hairy" women, but I'll make no such judgement. Jan likes his women unconventional. I'm unconventional. Not a retro beach babe with epic hair, chest, and all-over suntan. Just not immediately *obvious* in the looks department. I'd always considered this an unfortunate side effect of my parents' combined genes, but now that I know Jan's not necessarily into *obvious* beauty...

My mind merges itself with the present-tense once again. I look at Theo, Ernie, and Jan through the eerie haze of Thrailkill's office. Everyone looks like hell. It's been a long night. I don't know how we've managed to get our assignment done. I glance over Ernie's shoulder; his list on Jan reads:

1. Czech
2. Poor
3. Has a girl's name
4. Likes to bone retro chicks
5. Has a lousy DSL connection

That fat-ass. What does he know? Jan is gorgeous. Sure, he's frizzy, clothes loose-threaded—even his dollar store dye job has made his hair look orange instead of blond—but he's still gorgeous. I think I'm in love. I shouldn't feel like this, should I? It's wrong and it's right and I don't know what to make of it.

"My ex-husband loved Asia," Thrailkill snorts, bringing me back into focus. "Loved it so much he decided to marry a flight attendant after one weekend in Shanghai." She glares at Theo. "But it's not your fault your favorite band chose such a pretentious name."

* * *

The euphoria wears off around lunchtime. Part of it is the fact that I'm *really* starting to feel the effects of last night's SMN binge, but mostly it's the dawning audacity of me being a ninth grader. Everyone else is taller than me. The girls have hips, boobs—and boyfriends. Their clothes are too small. I step into the Boca Linda cafeteria and it's bare midriffs and legs galore. I'm quite out of place in my jogging suit and sneakers. I feel like an uninvited guest at a masquerade party.

Walking past the jocks staging arm-wrestling matches with each other, past the nerds playing Nintendo DS, the theater queens rehearsing their lines, past the Goths counting down the minutes until sundown, past the svelte California boys wearing the form-fitting "I was screwed over by Prop 8" T-shirts, I find my friends.

Theo waves to me, makes room for me to sit.

We're no longer on assignment, but we stick together anyway because we know it's pointless to try to make friends with the older kids—or to sit alone at opposite ends of the cafeteria while brooding over our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"We must look like fetuses to the others," Theo says.

With peanut butter smearing his chin, Ernie adds, "Or circus freaks."

Jan rests his head on the tabletop. Behind him, at the next table, a group of shaggy senior boys is giving us a "Who are you supposed to be?" kind of look.

"Nuts to them," says Ernie. "Let them smoke their cigarettes and feel each other up between class—we don't need them. We've got SuperMegaNet."

It's a silly thing to say. Ernie looks like he means it, but I can tell there's a trace of resentment in his voice. I want to change the subject, talk about my classes, my

teachers. It won't do any good, however. Physically we're here, but socially we're not. I'm feeling it through and through. I've been asked on numerous occasions if I'm someone's younger sister, or if I'm lost. When I show off my class schedule, I get a stupid smile in return. I'm *cute*, they all say. I'm *special*.

"I noticed last night that you all left your webcams on," I mention after several minutes of quiet eating. "What time did you guys go to sleep?"

"Sleep is for the dead," Ernie says, and pops open a Red Bull. (That's his lunch: Red Bull—and Doritos.)

Theo looks curious. "Did you guys have trouble shutting off your computers, too?"

Jan lifts his head, concerned.

"Yeah," says Ernie. "I was too tired to figure it out, though." He glares at Theo. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You're the geek, aren't you? What's wrong with our computers?"

Theo looks thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe SuperMegaNet is an 'always on' kind of thing. Like how certain games or media players disable your screensaver when you use them."

"Yeah, but this isn't just disabling our screensavers," I say, "it's keeping us from turning our computers off."

"It could be a failsafe."

"How's that?" asks Ernie.

"Well, it's probably not a good thing to have our computers turn off during a download—or before we're able to return home."

"So...so we have no more privacy, then?" asks Jan.

Theo adjusts his glasses. "Not as long as we're using SuperMegaNet, I'm guessing."

Jan swallows hard. "You mean...?"

"Yes," says Ernie. "I'm afraid we'll be seeing a lot more of each other's underwear."

I laugh, but it's a forced sound, now that my brain is entertaining the possibilities. Oh, God—what if Theo or Ernie had seen me sneaking into Jan's room? I study them both from behind my juice box, looking for hints, clues—thankfully Ernie starts talking about himself.

"I'm throwing a party," he announces, emptying the rest of the Doritos bag into his mouth. "You guys are invited. You too, Eva."

I scowl.

"When?" asks Jan.

"Friday night."

"Your parents are cool with it?" asks Theo. "Or are we going to have to whisper the entire time?"

"I live with my grandparents," says Ernie. "They stay out of my business, I stay out of their medicine cabinet."

"What's the occasion?"

"Nothing special. Just a buddy list party."

"So, that's...me, Jan, and Eva."

"For your information," says Ernie, "while you losers slept like little girls—no offense, Eva—I was *networking*."

Jan asks, "How many buddies do you have?"

"213."

"You don't know 213 people!" Theo exclaims.

"No, but after this weekend's shindig, I'll be the talk of the town."

I shake my head. "Don't you think it's dangerous adding random people to your buddy list—especially now that we know you can't just turn off your SuperMegaNet connection?"

Ernie waves his hand dismissively. "Hey, you've got to meet people to make friends. I'm *networking*. And if worst comes to worst, I can always unplug the power cord."

"I suppose you're right," says Theo. "Still..."

"Oh, there he goes again with the worrying!" Ernie rolls his eyes and winks at Jan. "Just wait till he's getting a lap dance from a busty college undergrad with a thing for bottle-end glasses. *Then* he'll understand the true power of the Internet."

What a pig. I want to chide him for being so crude, but I'm too busy scolding myself over last night's transgression—

—I hope to God I haven't been caught.

# Red Bull Gives You Broken Wings

**@ernie**

It's not like you don't know any better. I mean, you installed the SMN client on your computer. You don't install a social networking program unless you intend to *network*, right? Right. So don't get your panties in a knot when someone new drops by.

That's what's going through my mind as I materialize in amber268's bedroom, as she looks at me and screams, drops her hair brush. I've brought a box of SnackWell's with me as a gift, but she doesn't seem to care as she backs away from her computer and stands holding her towel around herself.

It seems I've caught her just out of the shower.

"Hello, darling," I say, trying not to stare.

She points at her computer. "Get out of here!"

"That's no way to treat a fellow SMN user."

"I don't care! Take a hike!"

"Really, now. My feelings are hurt."

"Ugh! Little boy, didn't your parents ever teach you to knock?"

I shrug. "My parents are dead. And besides, this is the Internet. There are no *doors*. Here..." I open the cookie box. "Have one."

Amber blinks, looks the slightest bit sorry. I'm imagining what she looks like without the towel. "Is that true?"

"What, the doors thing or my parents being dead?"

"Your parents."

"Yeah, it's true. They died when I was little. Black Friday stampede."

"That's so sad!"

"Yeah," I say. Most people react like that when I tell them about my parents. If my timing had been better, Amber might have let me snuggle up against her bosom and "talk" about it. "I'm still dealing with the trauma. My shrink says it's important to work on my intimacy, supplement what I haven't been getting from my parents."

Amber cocks her head, fathoming—but, as I mentioned, my timing is off. She's still irked that I'm here, and it only takes a moment for her to recover her attitude.

Pointing again at her computer, she says, "*Go away*."

"Fine." Go back to shaving the barnacle from your legs, or whatever it was you were doing before I got here.

I upload back home, sit at my desk, the SnackWell's box propped on my knees.

It's almost midnight.

*Click.*

I should probably finish my homework—but instead I pop the tab to another Red Bull.

*Click-click.*

I swallow another dose of caffeine.

I move on down the list in a state of denial, a part of me screaming bloody murder because I've very nearly visited every one of my 213 "buddies" and I haven't anything to show for it (Theo, Eva, and Jan don't count—they're the defaults). I figured there'd be more of a sensation to the whole SMN thing. So far, no one gives a rat's ass about fat little Ernest Goodale. No one *cool*, anyway. No one old enough to drink or buy porno. It's like having a MySpace full of people you never talk to, and it's annoying the hell out of me.

Even more annoying: the fact that the SuperMegaNet "Make Friends" interface is so surprisingly simple. Simple, but not easy. It's really just a table of thumbnailed, real-time video feeds. There are users logged in from all over the world, some talking, others typing, writing, eating, drinking, singing, playing guitar, performing acrobatics, kissing, having sex—anything goes, it seems (the sex displays never last long before they're interrupted, though, which leads me to believe there's some sort of moderation system in place). My favorites are the college girls. I've filtered my search results to include only females, ages eighteen to twenty-two...and I'm realizing with each rejection that online women are exactly like offline women: the prettier you are, the more likely it is that you're a biatch. Still, you're my yummy favorites, and, like a fool, I keep trying.

I discover the SMN skins feature on accident. I should know better, I should recognize the warning signs—I should have read the help page *before* trying to make friends with all my buddies. It's hard. From my perspective, I'm about to visit an enthusiastic brunette with humongous boobs and an empty dorm room.

"Sure, c'mon over," she says after we've exchanged pleasantries. She beckons to me via the video chat window. "My roommates are out for the night, and I'm *so* bored."

Jackpot! screams my libido.

Too easy! Danger, *danger!* screams my conscience.

Shut up, I tell them both. My virginity salutes me, says it's been an honor serving me, and prepares to bail out. As soon as I finish downloading, however, I know I've been had. My busty brunette turns out to be an overweight oaf of a man wearing the most horrific mullet I've ever seen. He says that his name's Brian and that he's having a sucker party.

"pwned!" his friends shout, pronouncing the "p" with gusto. They snap my photo, point, laugh. They begin to chant: "Fat kid gonna get some! Fat kid gonna get some!"

Now I'm really ticked. I want to punch everyone in the face. I want to overturn the furniture. I want to rip the mullet from Brian's scalp and banish it back to the horrific dimension from which it was conjured.

While all this is going through my head, Brian sends me home. It takes a full five minutes for me to notice the change in scenery. Afterward, sitting at my computer and angrily clicking here and there, it's *another* five minutes before I realize I can't seem to remove the bastard from my buddy list.

I open the SMN help file, which looks like it was thrown together at the last minute. Typos abound, and some pages are missing altogether. There is no mention of adding / removing buddies. Skins are briefly described:

> Skins are a beta feature of SuperMegaNet. Using the Skins add-on, you can alter your digitized appearance, including hair style, eye and skin color, height, weight, build, and more. Currently, this only works in video chat, but with version 1.0 you can expect skins to function throughout your SMN experience. Finally, you can be who you always wanted to be!

I hold my head in my hands.

Eff Brian and his gay posse. Eff SuperMegaNet.

I'm so deep in self-pity that I don't hear her materialize—not that I would, even if I'd been paying attention. This isn't *Star Trek*; there's no chiming or ringing or cheesy flickering lights, only the something-from-nothing sound of clothes rustling behind me, a muffled greeting:

"Um...hi."

I swivel around in my chair, inadvertently knocking an empty soda can onto the floor. It rolls across the carpet and stops at the sneakered feet of a girl my age who's just downloaded herself into my room. She's carrying a grocery bag.

I want to tell her off, but am too exasperated to give her more than, "Who are you?"

The girl is slow to respond. It looks like she's having a hard time getting the words out. It's probably her first time downloading. "I'm Becky. I, um, saw what happened to you, and...I felt so bad I...I thought you could use a friend."

Yeah, yeah. Rub it in. "I haven't had the best of luck with this SuperMegaNet business just yet."

"Tell me about it," Becky laughs, nervously. "The whole thing is a popularity contest, just like at school."

I study her. She's fat, like me, freckled, and has a pig nose—and her laugh sounds like chocolate frosting. Thick and gooey. I don't know how else to describe it. She must eat a lot of dairy. However, she *does* have several things going for her: she's not ghosting me, she's actually come to *me* in search of friendship—

—and she's brought snacks.

"Ginger snaps are my favorite," she says as she sits cross-legged on the floor with me. She empties her bag; the space between us becomes cluttered with junk food. "The fruit bars are good, too."

I'm speechless. I grab a ginger snap. And a fruit bar. And more.

I totally forget about pretty college girls.

This must be what it feels like to fall in love.

# The Semantic Web

**@theo**

I was right about the "always on" thing. Once you add someone to your buddy list, that's it. You establish a permanent, two-way connection. I tried removing Ernie (not that I'm already wanting to drop him or anything) and discovered there are absolutely no options for deletion.

It's sobering.

I let the idea sink in as I try to do my homework. From the corner of my eye I watch Ernie devour cookies and candy with some fat girl he's just met. One thumbnail over, Jan grunts and groans through his weight-lifting routine; beside him, in its own window, Eva's empty chair stares back at me (she must be at practice). I know everyone can see me seeing them. We're all spying on each other, a little cautious, maybe a little voyeuristic. I look at Ernie again and wonder how he can be so careless. 213 friends! Isn't he concerned that at any moment any one of those "friends" could come waltzing right into his bedroom? It's making me jealous, to be honest, the way he's carrying on so nonchalantly. I wish I could be that carefree. Well, maybe I don't—there'd be too many consequences to deal with afterward, wouldn't there?

I can't concentrate. Jan's annoying me. I mean, look at him there with his sweaty muscles bulging all over the place. He just *happened* to wear a tank top tonight—he's doing it on purpose, hoping Eva (or whoever else he's added to his buddy list) will spot him and swoon. Last night's meet-up must have proved quite inspirational. She was all over him, spying on him, sneaking into his room. The jockette stalking the jock. It makes sense, I guess. He's taller than me, and better looking, and these are things I never would have cared about six months ago, and now—

—I have to keep my brain on task.

But I can't.

Geometry is the most boring thing in the world right now.

I close my textbook, get real comfy in my chair, with the keyboard on my lap and the mouse poised on my knee. I just need to make *one* friend. Then I can call it a night.

I start browsing SMN users; I see kids from my middle school, boys who are too cool, girls who are too cute. I consider a dozen profiles, but I can't bring myself to add a single person to my buddy list. *They won't be interested*, I think. *They won't have time for me—they'll think I'm wasting* their *time. What if he wants to*

*roughhouse? What if she wants to cyber?* Except it wouldn't be cybering, would it? We'd both be in the same room, in our pseudo-bodies, yeah, but, like...together.

I'm being ridiculous. I'm feeling like I did when I first got the Internet. I was so excited about being connected to the world, to other people—but I've never actually made any friends online. I've kept in touch with people I know in real life, but it's never worked the other way around. Why? Because people who don't already know you don't *want* to know you. You can send them friendly e-mails or post comments on their MySpace pages, but they'll never reply after that initial, "Thanks for the add!"

It's kind of like that now, though I admit it's mostly self-imposed. Maybe I *could* work up the courage to make some new friends, but I already know what the response (or lack thereof) is going to be. So I dodge the "Add" buttons, pretending I'm too busy looking for someone or something else. I build an imaginary wall around myself, creating isolation in the process of seeking people out. It's my way. I tend to get flustered a lot. No wonder my palms are starting to sweat with each failed solicitation, no wonder my mom takes me to see Mr. Chandelier once a week.

I'm sure the evening will end in tears—then I stumble upon an online chat room called "The Semantic Web."

*That's it!* I think, gleeful, relieved. *Geeks! Byte brothers! Troubadours of tech!* I won't have to worry about my social abilities because it's supposed to be about the code.

I download into the room. According to the description, all programmers are welcome. The place is small, a bit cluttered; there are tables and chairs spread throughout, a big-screen display and sofa at one end—it's modeled after a converted lounge at someone's apartment complex, I realize, and it's *packed* with people, desktop computers, laptops.

And I'm the youngest person here.

"Virgin!" someone shouts, and immediately two guys step up to me. One of them is holding a Cheetos bag.

He says, "Sorry, but this isn't a Wii Meetup."

"I know," I say. "It's a Web programmers' room, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, I'm here to talk a little code."

The Cheetos dude looks at his friend and smirks. "Hmf. You think you're worthy because you know how to update your PlayStation firmware?"

"*Actually*," I say, "I design Web pages for paying clients." Which I do. I rattle off a well-memorized list of skills.

"Okay. You're a Web Monkey," says the Cheetos dude.

"Let's see you do a trick," says his friend. He pulls a small notepad from his shirt pocket, makes a quick sketch, shows it to me:

"Table or list?" he asks.

I look at the sketch. It's a grid of thumbnail images. Though a table *could* be used, I'm guessing by the chat room name that around here tables are taboo, used

strictly for tabular data—and even then only when DIVs are totally and completely out of the question.

"List," I answer, "with the list items set as block elements and floated left. Image margins can be adjusted according to thumbnail size, and a DIV wrapper with the appropriate width can have its right and left margins set to 'auto' for a centering effect."

The Cheetos dude nods, smacks his bright orange lips. "Internet Explorer or Firefox?"

"Opera," I answer. Opera rocks.

"Okay. You're worthy. But what about your parents?"

"What about them?"

"Where are they?"

"At home."

"Are they cool with you hanging around a bunch of strangers?"

Of course they're cool with it—because they don't know. "Yeah. I'm not really here. None of us are. These are just our online bodies." Though I'm thinking I should have taken a closer look at the SMN skin feature, maybe grown myself up by about ten years.

Someone calls out to the Cheetos dude. Something about his drop-down menu problem being solved. "Screw it. You can stay—but no crying or wetting your pants, okay? This isn't a nursery."

I nod, and my greeters leave me standing here feeling like a lost Kindergartner at a grocery store. I'd been accepted as a programmer, but as a person...I'm still just the equivalent of someone's younger brother. Background noise.

I make my way over to one of the tables, where a woolly-looking quartet have set up their laptops.

"Hey," I say, waving. "Working on some PHP?"

I get some looks, one nod.

I move on to the sofa. There's room between the chat room's sole female and a guy who looks like he just wandered in from two weeks on a desert island. Seating myself, it becomes obvious just how wide the rift is between me and everyone else. My face is baby-smooth, my feet don't even touch the floor; I feel like I'm slipping between the cushions. I listen for a chance to join the conversation, but it's all gibberish. Adult stuff. Money, medication—tax laws.

Eventually I return home, and I sit staring at my computer screen for a good long while. My buddy list still contains only three people: Ernie, Jan, and Eva. I feel younger than I've ever felt before. Younger and stupider. Here I have this awesome socializing tool at my disposal and I don't know how to use it.

Ernie appears in my room around one in the morning, when I'm winding down, finishing my homework before grabbing a couple hours of sleep. He doesn't seem to have a clue what time it is.

"You boned any hot chicks yet?" he asks, pounding a Red Bull like it's nothing.

"No," I reply. *Everyone's too interested in their own business*. "I had chores today—and homework."

"I have a girlfriend."

"Is that who you invited over?"

"Yep. She's from California, and she *loves* my beanie." He pats his head.

"Go home," I say, scowling. "I have work to do."

Ernie pats my shoulder. "You're only young once. Live it up while you can still get it up."

"Okay, fine, when I have the time—but right now I need to focus on what I'm doing." I shoo him away, and he shrugs, tells me to lighten up. I upload him out of my room before he knows what's happening. Then, alone with my disillusions, I once again hunch over my textbook.

Someone clears his throat behind me.

"Ernie," I begin, swiveling around—and stopping.

That's not Ernie standing in front of me. This is someone—some*thing*—else, someone with a pale, translucent body that's so featureless I can't tell if he's naked or clothed.

"Who are you?" I ask incredulously.

The visitor looks thoughtful for a moment. "Beta."

# Robbie

**@ernie**

There's a naked middle-aged man standing over my bed. He's holding a clear plastic pane in front of himself with one hand; with the other he's, well, playing the skin flute like it's overture night at the Starlight Bowl.

I'm still half asleep, not thinking straight. I pull the blanket over my head, count to ten, lower it again.

The man is still there—only now he's slowed his pace. He looks at me uncertainly, as if he's not sure whether I can see him through his pane.

I swear under my breath. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I hope I sound ticked off.

The man stumbles back a step, now letting go of his ding-dong and clutching his pane with both hands. "Crap! You...you can see me?"

"Yeah, I can see you!" I exclaim, squinting in the semi-darkness. My memory's a little hazy, but I think I might have added him from one of the gaming rooms—Robbie. His name's Robbie. "Now answer my question: What the hell are you doing?"

"I...I thought I was invisible." Robbie reaches behind himself, fumbling for the keyboard, trying to upload back home.

I get out of bed. I'm grossed out. You hear about pedos in the news all the time, but meeting one in person is a whole new level of *yuck*. "This is what you do with your spare time?"

"I didn't touch you, I swear!"

"Damn right you didn't!"

"P-please, this is a-all just a m-misunderstanding. I'll just be on my way..."

"There's no misunderstanding," I say, putting a swagger in my tone. "You downloaded yourself—*naked*—into a kid's bedroom. And you were masturbating. So, let me repeat: there's no misunderstanding."

Robbie hangs his head. "What are you going to do?"

I think fast. All sorts of wicked ideas pop into my head. "I'm going to compromise."

He blinks, a tear trickling down his cheek.

"Let's go to your place."

* * *

This is *so* good.

Robbie grunts.

He didn't think I'd have this much fun with it.

But I'm going to drag this out for as long as possible.

*Ahem.*

I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. I'm not some love-starved street urchin eager to jump under the covers with any ol' perv willing to give me food and shelter for the night. I'm simply starving.

Allow me to explain. My grandparents are fossilized idiots. They do everything by the book. What book? Damned if I know. The thing has probably yellowed and cracked and fallen apart with age (not unlike my grandparents themselves). Everything I do is metered and measured. A structured environment. Hence the lock on the refrigerator—a *lock*. How messed up is that? They're so sure fat little Ernie Goodale can't keep his hands out of the Cool Whip that they've padlocked it away, they've forced me to improvise—hiding Oreos in my closet, chocolate bars in my hamper.

This Robbie jerk-off...he too has forced me to improvise. So that's what I'm doing. I lick my spoon, savoring every last smidgen of fudge. The two of us—fully-dressed, mind you—are seated at his kitchen table.

"We have a deal, then?" I ask, looking over the contract I've drawn up.

Robbie nods.

"Once a week—mango gelato. Sugar wafers. Cookies. Cupcakes. Nacho platters from Rubio's—none of that Taco Bell fluff?"

He nods. I've got him by the balls—and I didn't even have to take off my clothes to do it. He supplies me with snacks, and I refrain from alerting the police to his little *misunderstanding*. You can say I'm a jerk or a severely misguided youth, but really I'm just taking advantage of a sweet situation. Robbie would have done the same. If not him, then someone like mullet Brian and his pranksters. So, no, I don't feel the least bit "bad" about what I'm doing. I won't be the victim.

Screw that.

## Simon Says I Think Too Much

**@theo**

I rub my eyes.

Simon, aka Beta, blinks at me. His blue, vaporous torso wavers. He has no hair, no eyebrows, no nipples or bellybutton or fingernails—he looks like an in-progress sketch. I know he's young for an adult, twenty-something. I know he's male because of his voice and name, and I'm sure he's Asian because, well, he looks Asian. He's wearing some kind of superhero skinsuit, or maybe he's lost his clothes in an unfortunate game of strip poker. There aren't enough details to tell one way or another.

*Too much homework*, I think to myself. *Not enough sleep*. This must be my brain's way of saying, "That's it, I'm out of here!" Nevertheless, I try to be rational. This isn't a computer ghost standing before me, and I don't feel far-gone enough to warrant a hallucination. More likely: Beta is a SuperMegaNet user wearing a custom skin. But the skins feature isn't finished yet, is it? Unless the help file is outdated...

Yes, I tell myself that's what this is: a misprint—though a lifetime of gorging on manga and science fiction novels and *Star Trek* reruns has me believing otherwise.

"Nice skin," I say.

Beta looks down at himself, brushes his hands over his abdomen. "Oh, this thing? It's just a quick mock-up. I'm still working on the final version."

"I thought skins hadn't been implemented yet."

"They haven't. I'm privileged."

"Yeah, so..." I clear my throat. "Where are you from?"

"/usr/bin/smn/beta...wait, no." Beta laughs. "That's my technical side jumping the gun again. It's been so long since I went actual. I'm from southern California—Garden Grove, originally."

I recall the street address listed on the SMN "About" screen. "Garden Grove, California? You work for the SuperMegaNet company? Taurus Labs?"

"Not so much these days. I was never *officially* laid off, but my position at Taurus is more an 'associate' kind of thing. You might say I'm on an extended vacation—geez, look at this place. A veritable Zen garden, huh?"

"Nothing wrong with that," I snort.

"No, I like it. Very...conducive. What's your name?"

"Theo."

Beta nods.

I twiddle my thumbs.

"So, why'd you visit me?" I ask.

"Why not? They're doing maintenance on the server for the next few hours, so I thought I'd drop in randomly."

"And Beta—that's your real name?"

"My real name is Simon. Simon Wong. Beta's my SMN name and gaming handle. Sort of an inside joke—multiple sclerosis. Before I stopped going actual, I told my friends that I was my mom's beta baby. Nice CD collection." Simon—Beta—has been casually examining my room. He pauses by my bookshelf, fingers a PHP manual. "Nice. How long have you been a programmer?"

I shrug. "Three years, almost. You?"

"Since my backpack and lunch box days."

I smile. I kind of like this Simon—*Beta*—guy. The Semantic Web would've been more palatable if he'd been there. "I don't have you on my buddy list. How'd you sidestep the rules?"

"It's difficult to explain the details," Beta says, "so I'll just give you the basic version. In the early days of the SMN testing phase—that would be a year ago next week—my computer hard drive died while I was virtual. It took my real body with it. My virtual self is intact, but is stuck on the server. Essentially, I'm a copy of my former self."

Yikes. I've been worried about my parents finding an empty room during one of my uploads, and here it's dawning on me just how bad things can get when the technology goes *poof!*

Beta seems to sense my worries, and waves his hand dismissively. "This was, as I said, the early days. We now keep a backup copy of every SMN user on our servers, just in case."

I ask, "So you live on the SuperMegaNet server?"

"Yeah."

"That sucks."

"It does and it doesn't. In virtual, my MS is history. I can change my body type as it suits me. I'll be twenty-one forever, until I choose to have myself deleted—or until we have a catastrophic hardware crash at Taurus. I can visit anyone around the world via SuperMegaNet. Of course, I don't actually *exist* anymore, but there are new game rooms coming out all the time, new chat rooms, new people to meet, new players to frag. I get around."

"That's terrible," I say softly, not meaning to bring Beta down or anything, but catching myself too late.

"You're sort of a tightly-wound little dude, huh?" He's reached the self-help section of my bookshelf; he takes a copy of *The Feeling Good Handbook* in his hands and flips through.

"I've always been like this," I say.

"Like what, exactly?"

"Tense. Tired, but never able to fall asleep on time."

"Ever tried warm milk at bedtime? Red wine? Tequila shots at McFistiggans?"

Beta chuckles. “Oh, that’s right: your profile says you’re twelve.”

I sigh. “It doesn’t work like that for me.”

“Well, I can guarantee the tequila would—but we’ll have to work around the technicalities. What about St John’s Wort?”

“Herbs, diet—” I gesture at the exercise mat rolled up beside my desk. “—yoga, daily trips to my mom’s fitness club, CBT...if any of this works, it’s coincidence. It’ll take more than an hour for me to fall asleep once you’ve gone.”

“Yeah?” Beta replaces the *Handbook* back on its shelf and turns to face me. He folds his arms. “Well, maybe you just think too much. Maybe you just need to keep your mind occupied. Got any video games?”

“I have a Wii.”

Beta makes a face, nods. “Okay. You’re a casual gamer. That’ll have to do. Set it up.”

I’m halfway to telling him I’d rather tackle my insomnia on my own, but already he’s gone over to my computer and is poking around. Quickly I switch on my TV, hoping I can distract him before—

“She’s a cutie,” he says. “Your girlfriend?”

I swallow, embarrassed. I know he’s talking about Eva. “She’s...my friend—don’t you have better things to do than look at other people’s buddy lists?”

“Yes, but until the server work is finished, my options are limited.”

“I have school tomorrow.”

“School schmool. You want to spend the next hour laying awake in bed? Or do you want to get in a couple of rounds of *Super Smash Bros*?”

“But—”

“Shut up and let’s play, dude.”

# I Can't Believe He Said That

**@eva**

Ernie's sour attitude is sucking the life out of an otherwise sunny, blue-skied Friday afternoon.

"What kind of school *is* this?" he cries, and plops himself across from me at our table. Beside him, Theo scowls and makes room.

"What's the matter?" asks Jan.

"A couple of idiot boys in my English class stole my backpack and were looking through my porn collection. They saw the *Playboy* and *Hustler* magazines and told the teacher I was looking at porn during class! So the teacher emptied out my backpack and told me to *behave*!"

"That's your fault," Theo points out, "for bringing your porn collection with you to school."

"It's *my* backpack," Ernie says. "I should be able to keep anything I want in there!"

"All I'm saying is—"

"No one questioned those butt-wipes stealing my personal property! *They're* the ones who misbehaved. Just because I have dirty magazines in my backpack doesn't mean I look at them during class time. I had those magazines in there at my old school, too, and no one ever took my backpack away. Kids were *mature* about things like that. These goddamned high schoolers...they just want to make it obvious that I don't fit in."

"None of us fits in," I say, trying to be comforting simply because I don't like the other students looking at our table whenever Ernie yells something. This first week at Boca Linda has been easy for me. The boys have been busy hitting on girls their own age; the girls treat me as one of their own. From a distance, yes—but no one has bullied me. "Tell me it was any better when we were with kids our own age."

Ernie seems not to hear. "They think I'm *so* freaking amusing because of my weight. Theo's probably picked on because of his glasses, Jan because of his accent. And if you had boobs, Eva, they'd probably be too saggy or lopsided. Everyone's a critic around here."

I nearly choke on my apple juice, that uppity voice in the back of my head exclaiming, "He did *not* just make fun of my flatness!"

I clear my throat. "You've got boobs—is that what they say about them?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Theo tries to hide his laughter.

Jan (perhaps on purpose, perhaps not) draws attention away from my insult: "Did you do anything to provoke the boys who stole your backpack?"

"No!" Ernie pauses. "Well, I might have said something beforehand."

"What did you say?" asks Theo.

Ernie rolls his eyes. "They were talking nonstop about their girlfriends. Annoying garbage like how big their dongs are, how amazing they are in bed, and how many different ways they can rupture a cervix. So I turned around and said, 'Maybe if you didn't stick your wiener into every random girl who breezed by it wouldn't burn when you pee in the morning and you wouldn't have to spend your weekends waiting in line at the free clinic.'"

Jan giggles. "That's pretty funny."

"That's *rude*," I correct, though I'm charmed by Jan's laughter, intoxicated by his toothy smile. And, truthfully, Ernie's statement isn't without merit.

"Yeah," Ernie says, "but they were asking for it—and I'm the one who gets punished. Apparently talking about monster schlongs and cervices during class is far more acceptable than my having a little harmless porn on my person." He digs into his backpack, pulls out a box of peanut butter wafers, a bag of M&Ms, and a can of soda. He slams each item on the tabletop in succession. "Screw them all."

Theo looks at the snacks with a worried expression. "That's your lunch?"

(Theo's what you'd call a health nut. When it comes to food, he shops exclusively at the local Vitamart, where everything is organic—which isn't a bad thing in and of itself, except that he tends to fret way too much over other people's eating habits. Sort of a "you shouldn't eat that because it's bad for you" thing. It bugs me.)

"Did you rob a convenience store?" I ask Ernie.

"Har-har," he replies, flicking me off. He faces Theo and Jan. "*Actually*, check this out. This prevert guy downloads into my bedroom, right? He's got a privacy screen with him, but it isn't working—the perv is standing there naked and trying to get his jollies watching me sleep. I catch him in the act and he loses it, starts groveling at my feet not to tell. So, I strike a deal: he has to supply me with unlimited snacks or else I'll go to the police."

I don't usually resort to metaphorical descriptions, but dead silence literally falls over the table like an oppressive fog (Theo even waves his hand in the air, as if trying to chase some of it away). Ernie's beaming with pride, but the rest of us are aghast.

After a moment I find my voice: "You're blackmailing a pedophile?"

Ernie shrugs, pops a handful of M&Ms into his mouth. "We have an agreement."

"Even though he's a sexual deviant."

"His problem, not mine."

"Ernie, you're twelve years old. You're his *type*. It might very well become your problem!"

"He wouldn't dare touch me."

"That's all good and well," I say, "but we're on your buddy list, too. What if he takes a liking to one of *us*?"

"Relax. He only likes boys." Ernie ruffles Theo's hair; Theo swats back. "If Robbie takes a liking to anyone, it'll be Theo here."

The dire expression on Theo's face says it all: *I don't want to wake up with Robbie the Friendly Pervert snuggled up beside me!*

"You're an idiot, Ernie," I say. "This whole thing is ridiculous."

Ernie snorts—and catches me completely off guard with his next statement. "No more so than *your* sneaking into Jan's bedroom the other night."

Dead silence.

Again.

Ernie is gorging himself on wafers, taking them two at a time; this spectacle is secondary to what Theo and Jan are shooting me: two perfectly composed expressions of, "What the hell?" Gradually I hear a slight choking beside me. Jan is reaching somewhere deep inside his impeccably placid façade for a handful of outrage.

"I can't believe you spied on me!" he cries.

I disregard him out of necessity, aim my wrath squarely at Ernie. "I can't believe you said that!"

Ernie, between gulps of carbonated corn syrup: "I can't believe you're a voyeur."

*Ugh!* I want to leave this instant, but I won't give Ernie the pleasure of knowing he's humiliated me. Suddenly the rest of my turkey sandwich is the most delicious thing I've ever tasted, and I avail myself of it, head bowed, eyes on my napkin.

The others are talking about me as if I'm not even here:

"Are you serious? She was...she was in my room?"

"Yeah, man. That first night we all got together. But don't worry, she didn't take photos or anything. Not that I noticed."

"Wait—you were watching her watch me?"

"Your webcam was on."

"Why didn't you wake me up or something?"

"I was captivated by your undies."

"You're as bad as she is!"

An uneasy silence passes between us. No doubt we're all thinking the same thing: SuperMegaNet has turned us into a bunch of voyeurs—and Ernie is friends with a pervert.

And Jan will probably never speak to me again.

Ernie belches loudly, and I look up. "You guys are still on for tonight, right?"

"What's tonight?" Theo asks.

"Duh. My buddy list party."

"Are you sure there's room for us and your 213 *friends*?" I ask, bitter, unable to help myself.

"Yeah, yeah. It's going to be great. Tell Summer to come—her and any other lovelies on your list. Theo, you can bring that Beta fellow."

Theo cringes. “You were spying on me, too?”

“Oh, come *on*, guys!” Ernie exclaims. “This is the nature of the program! Of course we’re going to see each other changing for school or blasting farts out the window when we think no one’s looking. So what? We’re roommates. What if we were in college together? Would you still be overreacting like this?” When he gets nothing from the others, he taps my hand, smearing peanut butter on my knuckles. “Are you coming tonight, Eva?”

I grab my things and leave the table.

Drop dead, Ernie.

I never wanted to be your friend anyway.

# Buddy List Party

**@ernie**

The party's going to suck. I'm sitting here at my computer, my SMN window glowing dutifully in front of me...and I'm marveling at the odds. 213 friends on my list and not a single one has responded to my invitation. What's up with that?

Earlier in the afternoon, my grandparents had caught me sneaking the extra folding chairs from the garage to my bedroom. Once they realized I was setting up for guests, it was all over. They grounded me to my room for the night to repent my sins. Still, I'd had hope. My computer's here in my room; my friends could have all downloaded without trouble. As for snacks, I was going to hit up Robbie anyway, so again, the show would go on. Sure, we'd all have to keep our voices down, but...well...aw, heck. Who am I kidding? It's almost five o'clock and there's no sign anyone's coming. Even if they did, it would be a totally lame affair.

I lean back in my chair, rub my eyes. I've nearly emptied a 2-liter of Diet Coke, but it hasn't made me feel the slightest bit better.

I wait.

Five thirty creeps around.

On my screen, Theo, Jan, and Eva's SMN windows are still empty.

This sucks hairy wet rump. Where the hell *is* everyone? Being a jockette, Eva can explain her absence—she's probably at wrestling practice. Jan, well, he's poor, and so probably has to walk home from school (meaning he might not be due home until seven or eight, depending on which chain gangs are working his neighborhood). But Theo, he's all nerd. He has no excuse for not going directly home to study. Unless...unless Eva, angry at me for spilling her "secret" during lunch, somehow got the others to boycott the party. Maybe everyone's hiding off-camera, avoiding me, going about their routines as if I don't even exist.

Now I'm curious—and paranoid. Without thinking, I upload myself into Theo's bedroom. He's not there.

I tell myself he's decided to hang out in his parents' living room or something. Maybe he's making a sandwich in the kitchen. I cross the bedroom, opening the door and stepping out into the hallway of some kind of Zen monastery. Everything's clean, proper, uber artsy. It looks like an Asian family lives here. At the end of the hall is a staircase (so, Theo's parents own a two-story house, apparently). Down I go, with two choices of direction once I reach the bottom: the dining room—and a converted *shoin*, complete with grass mats, sliding doors, bonsai, wall hangings, and incense.

I'm wondering if Theo's parents adopted him when I make the transition into the dining room—and there they are, sitting at the dinner table. Theo's blond-haired, blue-eyed mom and his 100% Chinese-looking father.

I stop dead in my tracks, caught. Game over. The gig's up.

"Er, hello there," says Mrs. Ivanovich. She sets down her mug. "Who might you be?"

My usual eloquence escapes me—so I make my crap up as I go along. "I'm Theo's friend. From school. I hope I didn't startle you. I'm from back east. We all leave our front doors open." I think. I hope.

Mrs. Ivanovich smiles. She doesn't look like a mom. She looks like a college girl. She's trim, trendy—*hot*. Hot enough that I'm guessing her Chinaman beau fell in love with her so hard he took *her* last name when they got married. "Theo's friend, eh?"

"Um...yeah. Well, I mean, we only met on Monday 'cuz we're in the same program and all, but I consider him a friend, yeah."

"Funny. He's never mentioned you before."

Crap!

"Or anyone else, for that matter," adds Mr. Ivanovich.

Crap!

Mrs. Ivanovich clarifies: "Theo's not very, ah, social. He rarely brings his friends over. You're the first, actually."

Crap...?

"Do you have a name?" asks Mr. Ivanovich, smiling, gesturing for me to approach the table, "or do we simply call you 'Theo's friend'?"

I step forward, my tensions easing a bit. "Oh, I'm Ernie."

We all shake hands; Mrs. Ivanovich offers me a seat, a cup of tea.

"That's very kind of you," I say, "but I'm more of a hot chocolate kind of guy. Say, is Theo still on for our little get-together tonight?"

Theo's parents look questioningly at each other.

"Get-together?" asks Mr. Ivanovich after a moment.

I shrug. "Yeah. A DVD, some popcorn...maybe a few scoops of ice cream, if you've got any laying around. But I totally understand if tonight's not a good night. That's why I wanted to touch base with you first, make sure Theo's got all his homework done and the like. You *know* how boys can be."

Mrs. Ivanovich laughs. "Such an old soul you are!" She rises from her chair, smooths her skintight T-shirt (which doesn't need any smoothing whatsoever, I can tell you). "Theo's with his therapist right now, but I'm actually going to pick him up in ten minutes or so. Dr. Chandelier is always talking about the benefits of friends and activities—I'm sure Theo would *love* to have you over. I know I would."

Love's an apt word. I'm definitely feeling it. I wonder how Theo manages not to sport raging wood at all hours of the day and night with this fine piece living under the same roof. His mom's trying to be dignified, but I can see in her face that she's thrilled her son's supposedly demonstrated a semblance of normality. Who

cares if it's a lie? It's a *productive* lie.

Mrs. Ivanovich leaves to pick up Theo. Meanwhile, Mr. Ivanovich invites me into the den, where we set out cups, plates, snacks. It's all healthy junk food, but it's better than nothing at all. So I smile and nod and say "thank you" and "yes, sir" and all the other things an adorable little fat boy like myself should say when he wants to charm his way into the hearts of an unsuspecting family.

Five minutes in, I ask to use the bathroom. Mr. Ivanovich cheerfully waves me upstairs; I take the opportunity to duck into Theo's room and upload myself back home. The timing is beautiful, as Eva is just walking into her bedroom.

I adjust my webcam, clear my throat. "Hi, Eva."

She ignores me for a moment, sets down her shopping bag and fiddles with her computer—I can tell she's trying to figure out a way to turn me off, but she can't.

I say, "I'm sorry for what happened at lunchtime."

Eva frowns. "Yeah, well, it's a little late for that now."

"It would have come out sooner or later. I just wish I hadn't blurted it out like that."

She says nothing. She knows I'm right.

"Our cams are on 24/7. We're linked together for good. Did you think no one was ever going to peek?"

"I don't know what to think," Eva says, finally looking at me. "I never planned on finding a program like this, or meeting people like *you*."

"You mean fat and obnoxious people?"

She sighs. "You don't think before you speak. You don't take anything seriously."

"If that's true, why am I talking to you right now?"

"I don't know. That worries me. So does the Robbie thing. And telling everyone I was in Jan's room."

"Because you can't run away and hide from it like you'd normally be able to."

I'm being serious, but Eva takes it the wrong way. "You're such a jerk, Ernie."

"And *you* are a pessimist. You automatically assume everything I say is meant to harass you."

"I'm not a pessimist!" Eva exclaims.

I hold up my hands. "Okay, you're not. But let's just...let's just put it past us. We're stuck together. For better or for worse. We have to be accountable. We *all* knew what you did, Eva—well, everyone besides Jan—and now we all have to deal with it. We have to move on."

Eva's face pales. "Theo knew? Why'd he act so surprised?"

"Theo *always* looks surprised." I pause, wondering... "You like him or something?"

"Ew, no!"

"I meant Jan."

Eva looks away, bites her lip—and holy Hello Kitty, I see it now. She *totally* digs Jan; she's out for more than just a glimpse of him in his undies.

"Come to the party," I say, trying to sound gentle, supportive. "It'll all work

out, you'll see."

"I can't," Eva replies. "Even if I wanted to. It would be awkward."

"Yes, but not impossible. He's asking about you."

"You're joking."

I'm *lying*, actually. "I talked to him earlier, and he said he doesn't want one mistake to ruin a whole school year of possibility. He's totally willing to forgive and forget. If you don't show up, it'll look like you don't care. He'll see you online every day after school and he'll wonder why you're ignoring him."

"Oh, he'll know why I'm ignoring him."

"That won't solve anything, Eva."

She plays with her mouse. "Geez..."

"Geez what?"

"We're really stuck together, aren't we?"

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"It can be."

"If you think negatively."

Eva sighs. "I can't go to the party."

"Why not?"

"My parents would never approve of me downloading into a boy's bedroom."

"Ah!" I exclaim. "So you admit maybe it's not so bad meeting with Jan again after all!"

"*Maybe*. But the timing would never work."

"Lock your door," I say. "Tell your parents you're studying for an hour. If it makes you feel any better, we're going to be in Theo's living room. No sex or drugs or anything."

"Really?" Eva looks surprised. "How'd you manage that?"

"I'm friends with his parents. They set up the whole thing. *Please* come."

"Wait, so they know about SuperMegaNet?"

"Well," I say, "they know that Theo's having some friends from school over."

It takes her a moment to decide. I can tell she's oscillating between responsible daughter and naughty little girl—and even though she's embarrassed by what she did to Jan, she *so* wants to see him again.

Eventually, she says, "If I go to the party, you have to do something for me."

"Name it."

"You have to cut Robbie off from this point forward."

"But SuperMegaNet doesn't let you delete friends—"

"I know. Just don't go to him for junk food anymore. Ignore him."

"Now wait a minute," I say. "Why shouldn't I take advantage of the guy who wanted to use me as his own personal visual aid?" But I can see it in her eyes: *One more sugary deal with that pervert and I won't be your friend*. I guess I should be flattered; a cute girl (bug-eyed, yes, but still cute) is willing to work things out with me. My only problem is snacks. It's been a good week in that department, and I'm hesitant to give it up. Theo's fridge and pantry are loaded with wheat grass and tofu products; Jan's probably too poor to afford more than beans and tortillas (or

whatever the Czech equivalent is); Eva's a possibility, though her parents may or may not be as athletically inclined as she is, and they may or may not eat garbage and work it off afterward. They could be just as prudish with the groceries as the Ivanovichs.

Goddamnit. Time's passing. Theo's dad is probably wondering where the hell I am. I make a mental note to raid Eva's fridge before agreeing to her terms—and insisting that she bring two friends with her to the party.

"Why two?" she asks.

"Why not? You don't have two friends?"

"I have *more* than two friends."

"Fine, then. You should have no problem bringing a pair."

Eva smiles. "It sounds like you're trying to make up for an empty guest list."

I'm starting to get annoyed. "Come on, Eva. We're wasting time here."

"Okay, *okay*. I'll see if Summer and Lily want to come. That way we can talk to each other instead of having to talk to you."

"*Haw-haw.*"

"When do we download?"

"Um, ten minutes." That should be enough time for Jan to trickle in. I switch SMN windows; he's sitting at his desk, slurping soup.

Fug yeah.

"Jan," I say.

He blinks, reaches out and taps his keyboard. "Oh, hey, Ernie."

"Upload to Theo's place."

"Why?"

"Because he wants us to help him with something. I don't know exactly what, but he seemed pretty insistent about it."

Jan's expression turns grave. He sets down his bowl. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know. Me and Eva are uploading there now. Hurry."

I don't wait for an answer. Hopefully my urgency will supplant the need for a proper explanation. I upload myself back into Theo's bedroom—just as Theo himself arrives home. Before he can say a word, I slam the door and lock it.

"Why are you home so friggin' late?" I ask, grinning.

"I always get home late," Theo replies, setting down his duffel bag. "Five on Mondays through Thursdays, six on Fridays."

I notice out of the corner of my eye a pair of sneakered feet slowly materializing beside Theo. "Where the hell do you go?"

Theo looks embarrassed. "My mom's gym."

"The gym? You work out?"

"Yeah."

"Damn."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just I'm the only fat-ass in a quartet of hard-bodies."

Theo sighs, steps further into his room and looks around for any signs of tampering on my part. "It's therapeutic, actually. I have trouble sleeping at night.

My doctor recommends daily physical exercise to help burn off excess energy." He turns around and faces me, folds his arms. "What's this about a party?"

I start to explain, but at that moment three distinct shapes begin to materialize in Theo's room.

Eva and her friends.

(Jan's made it up to his knees.)

I only have a moment to reassure Theo, so I step forward, take him by the shoulders, and say, "We're in high school now. Make this work for me, Theo. For *us*."

Theo starts to answer—

—I cut him off: "I don't want to be the fat kid with no friends. You don't want to be the geek who's never had a gaggle of cute girls over his house."

"But you didn't even *ask* me, you just invited yourself over—"

"Then I'm asking now." I give Theo a hug. "Friend to friend, pal to pal. I need you, man. You need me."

"*Ahem*."

Crud. That wasn't Theo clearing his throat. I peek around his neck and see that the girls have finished downloading. They're looking at us with amused, slightly grossed-out expressions on their faces.

I immediately let go of Theo and face them wide-eyed. "Theo's, uh, pet hamster died. I was just...being there for him, that's all."

Eva shakes her head and introduces her friends. I give Summer the look-over. Blond, bright gray eyes, she's one of those cheerleader types whose hand print P.E. shorts, tank top, and thong sandals do well to showcase her sunny disposition, her carefree demeanor. Small, husky, but certainly not fat. Spunky would be the appropriate parlance. She's cute as a button, hot as a summer day, but the look behind her eyes is cold as ice. Already she's written me off as a blundering fat-ass, which may be a fair assessment, if somewhat premature.

Lily's poofy-haired, and is wearing baby blue sweatpants and a hoodie. She's a non-Asian version of Amy Wong from *Futurama*. Makeup galore. It makes her look kind of slutty—which shouldn't bother me. I mean, I look at slutty women all the time on the Internet. But when I see girls my age made up like that I start imagining myself as the older brother. They don't even have a rack yet and already they're painting face. It just irks me. Like when muscle boys strut around with their shirts off. I want to go up to them and demand, "Who the hell asked to see your nips, dude?"

We all shake hands. I gesture at Theo. "This is Theo, the smart one."

"And this is Ernie," Theo shoots back. "The fat one."

Summer chuckles, notices Jan, whose waist has just appeared. "Who's that?"

"Jan," Eva offers, looking the slightest bit nervous.

"The poor one," I add. I'm trying to be charming, but instead everyone just glares at me. "Er, maybe we should wait for him downstairs."

Theo stops me before I reach the door. "What about my parents?"

"I told you, they're cool."

"About the party, maybe, but what about the idea of a bunch of people downloading into my bedroom?"

"Hmm. You're right." I rub my chin. "Can you create some kind of diversion?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know...draw your mom and dad away from the den so we can sneak in?"

"And later, when it's time for everyone to go home?"

Damn it, does he have to worry about every last detail? "We'll figure that out when the time comes."

Lily puts her hands on her hips. "You two haven't thought this through, have you?"

Theo jabs his finger in my direction. "This is all *his* work!"

"Quiet!" Eva hisses. She turns to Theo. "Why don't you check out the situation downstairs so we know what our options are?"

He nods, sticks his tongue out at me, and leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

The rest of us sit on the floor, waiting. Beside us, Jan quietly continues downloading.

I nod at Eva. "So, how'd you girls meet?"

Eva shrugs. "We met while my old wrestling team was competing in Wisconsin. Lily's mom was putting us up for the weekend."

Summer, to Eva: "How'd you meet Ernie?"

"A school project," answers Eva, rolling her eyes. "It's kind of snowballed, thanks to the SuperMegaNet thing."

Lily nods. "I know. Isn't it freaky?"

"You know what's *really* freaky?" asks Summer. "This room. I've never seen a boy's bedroom so neat and clean."

We all fall quiet for a moment, appreciating the Zen, using it as an excuse not to look at each other. It's hard, because Summer is chewing gum, smacking her lips—all but demanding attention.

Eventually I open my big mouth: "So, you guys think Theo was adopted?"

Eva raises her eyebrows. "Why would he be?"

"He looks nothing like his parents." I get up and go over to Theo's desk; sure enough, there's a small framed family portrait resting beside one of the computer speakers. I hand it to the girls to pass around.

"Wow," Summer says, "you're not kidding."

"His mom looks like a supermodel," says Lily.

"I can't believe she's a day over twenty-one," says Eva. "I hope I look that good when I'm her age."

"Must be all the homeopathic remedies and organic foods," I say.

"Seems to work," Summer says. "Theo has one of the nicest complexions I've ever seen—"

The bedroom door flies open; Theo stumbles in. He looks freaked out.

"What's the matter?" I ask, getting up along with everyone else.

"This isn't going to work," Theo says. "My mom and dad want to meet everyone's parents and set up trips to the mall, the movies—if they find out how you all got here..."

"Dude, relax, we'll figure it out. How about this: you tell your parents that—"

"What's going on?"

I look over my shoulder to see that Jan's finished downloading and is now looking at everyone with a quizzical expression on his face.

"I think," Summer says, "it's time for everyone to go home. Oh, I'm Summer, by the way. This is Lily."

Jan and the girls shake hands. Summer whispers something into Lily's ear, causing her to giggle.

"But we haven't even gotten to the snacks!" I cry.

"There'll be other times," Eva assures me. "For now it's enough that we've met each other."

"Could someone *please* tell me what's going on?" asks Jan.

I sigh. "It's time to go home. That's what's going on."

He blinks at me. "But I just got here."

In answer, I walk over to Theo's computer and click the "Send Home" button.

"Hey!" he yelps—but it's too late. His head has already begun to pixelize.

"Was that really necessary?" asks Eva.

I shrug. "Meh."

"He's been in transit for the last ten minutes," Theo points out. "You could have let him go last."

"Whatever. Doesn't matter. Party's over." I retreat to my own corner of the room and slide down onto the floor. I hold my head in my hands and try to figure out where I went wrong. Was it the timing? The lies? Does God merely hate me?

The others whisper goodbye to each other, eventually uploading home. Eva's the last the go. Before she does, she comes over to where I am, crouches beside me.

"You didn't want to have a party so that me and Jan could patch things up, did you?"

I look up. Theo is fidgeting over by his desk.

"You did it," Eva continues, "because no one on your buddy list responded to your invitation. You couldn't *stand* not being popular, so you convinced yourself even if it was just the six of us, you could forgo the failure of not having a party at all by calling us here for an impromptu."

My insides recoil. How the tits does she know this stuff? "And you only came to keep me from seeing Robbie again."

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't."

"Thanks. That makes me feel *so* much better."

"You don't need to be sarcastic."

"I'm the fat kid. Of course I do."

Eva sighs, straightening. "Goodnight, Ernie." She steps in front of Theo's computer, nodding at him to send her home. In a moment she's gone.

"Your turn," Theo says softly.

I get up. I assume the position.

"If it's any consolation, my parents seem to love you."

"Woo-hoo."

"It'll work out better next time."

"Yeah, sure," I say, though I don't care if there's a next time, because no matter what the possibilities are, we're all still kids subject to our parents' rules.

We're all still *stuck*.

"Goodnight," I mumble.

Theo sends me home.

## Your Friends Are Weird

**Note:** Ernie's forced apology at the end of this episode is a tongue-in-cheek reference to a fictional blog post at my old Web site in which Ernie expressed his disapproval for my then-recent *SuperMegaNet* hiatus. The site, and Ernie's blog post with it, has long since been taken down, but Ernie's apology lives on.

* * *

**@summer**

The thing about Eva is, she's totally naïve. I'm not knocking her or anything, but sometimes she tries to be too nice to too many people—especially people she doesn't know. This whole friendship thing with Theo, Ernie, and Jan...she doesn't get that it was just an assignment. She doesn't need to actually become *friends* with them.

I'm telling her this from the backseat of my dad's Ford Excursion as he drives me to Saturday morning practice, my netbook propped on my knees, Eva's video messenger window filling my screen. "You don't owe them anything."

"I know," Eva says. She's brushing her hair. "But it's not like I can delete them from my buddy list. SuperMegaNet doesn't allow that. At least, not yet."

"Yeah. Stupid program, if you ask me. Makes you pay for your mistakes."

Eva looks slightly offended. "I wouldn't call Jan and his friends 'mistakes'."

"You're not actually going to stick around with them, are you?"

"I'll keep them as buddies, and I'll see them at school."

I roll my eyes. "But they're *weird*. You want weirdos for friends?"

Eva looks away. She's trying to pretend she's fishing around her desktop for scrunchies. I think she's blushing.

"Oh, I see," I say. "You want Jan's buns—like Ernie wants cinnamon buns."

From the driver's seat, my dad gives me a look via the rear-view mirror. "Who're you talking to, sweetie?"

"Nobody, dad," I reply, annoyed. "Just pay attention to the road."

He faces forward again, chuckling to himself. I know I probably shouldn't talk to him like I do, but, then, I *am* his little darling, his little star—as long as my GPA is impeccable, I can get away with the tart-mouth.

I bring my SMN window into focus. Jan's huffing and puffing with a pair of dumbbells; Ernie's inhaling a box of sugar cookies; Theo's staring dully at his screen and typing furiously. "Hon, you need to start hanging with me and the girls.

There are some *fine* guys on the football team."

"Why are you turning Big Sister on me?" Eva asks.

"Because I love you, babe."

"They're harmless. Really, they are."

"Clueless is more like it." I give Jan another peek. He's started working his triceps. From what Eva's told me, Jan's not on any teams, nor is he training for any reason other than to get the muscles. He hasn't got any direction. That usually means trouble. "Didn't you say Ernie embarrassed you in front of everyone?"

"Yeah...but he's made it up to me in his own way."

"How? By not spitting cookie crumbs at you when he speaks?"

Eva sighs and says, "You can't hold everyone you meet to a specific criteria."

"If you don't, then you open yourself up for all kinds of heartache. That whole 'give them a kiss and they'll ask for the key to your house' thing."

"It's a little late for that. With SuperMegaNet, we've all got the keys to each other's houses now, don't we? Well, figuratively speaking."

I say, "Just because you have SuperMegaNet doesn't mean you should use it. It's a great idea for a chat program, but it's socially flawed. You don't make friends online. You make stalkers. That's why these people are online in the first place: They think they can get away with everything that's not allowed in real life."

Eva gives me an unconvinced look.

"I should know," I continue. "I was stalked once. Remember?"

"Yeah—"

"That nerdy creep. The one who saw me at that pep rally this year. Pretended he was writing some kind of sports article and used it as an excuse to hit me up on MySpace. First he was asking about cheer routines, then it was waist sizes and undie lines. To make his article more *realistic*, you see."

"I know the story, Summer—"

I cut Eva off again; she needs to get this. "Being a public figure has taught me more than just the drills and skills. It's taught me how to see through all the cow patty. You could cheer locally for years and the only people you'll ever see in the stands are family, friends, friends of friends. But the day your team goes national, the day you start getting your picture taken by more than just the moms and dads trying to out-do one another, well, that changes everything. Pictures or videos of you are on the news or the Internet and suddenly you have all kinds of *friends*. I don't need to tell you that all it takes is a pretty face to get the attention of *friends* you never knew you had."

Eva holds up her hand, cutting me off. "Okay, look. I didn't meet the boys online, I met them *at my school*. We collaborated online *afterward*. And not one of them has asked to date me or be my bedroom coach. Whatever that means."

"It means—"

"I don't want to know."

"It's only been a week," I say. "Things could change if, say, Theo gets the silly notion that you're easy."

Eva makes a face. "Why Theo?"

"Babe, he was *totally* giving you the goo-goo eyes yesterday."

"He was not!"

"How would you know? You were ogling Jan's legs the whole time he was downloading."

The look on Eva's face tells me I've hit home—she's letting her infatuation with Jan get the best of her and she knows it.

"Jan and Theo and Ernie are there for me," she says after thinking for a sec. "I know it sounds silly, but...they are."

"They're there for you because they have nowhere else to go."

"So what? It's hard being the underling at school. You and the cheerleading team may be local celebrities, you may have to deal with fanboys and stalkers, but I have the exact opposite. *No one* wants to talk to me or be around me. Everyone's older, more 'mature'. They all act like I need someone to change my diaper or fetch me a bottle. It may not be ideal, but with the boys I can spend my lunches not having to wander around the halls pretending I have somewhere to go."

"So, you're using them as a crutch."

"I am *not*."

"Babe, that's not an insult. We all do it. My parents use *me* as a crutch, for crying out loud. 'Our daughter's in cheer!' they're always telling their friends. 'Her squad just made a sweep at such and such competition! Isn't she *wonderful*?' Who cares if I'll even want to be doing cheer a year from now? As long as they've had a few years where they can ride the wave, they're totally cool with whatever it takes to keep me a star."

My dad looks back at me again, unsure if he's heard what he thinks he's heard over the roar of the engine. I simply dimple at him, say, "I love you, daddy!" and the whole thing is forgotten.

I'm such a little bitch.

On my netbook screen, Eva's become frozen in her SMN window.

"What happening?" I ask.

"Look at Ernie," she replies.

I switch windows, bringing Ernie's into focus. He's stopped eating, and is now standing up, adjusting his webcam. He's got a sheet of looseleaf paper in his hand; he starts reading off of it:

"In light of my recent blog entry over at Jessture.com, I'd like to take this opportunity to make a formal apology to the writers and readers of *SuperMegaNet*. I was a little harsh regarding the recent hiatus, and while I was upset, I was by no means entitled to act the way I did. I mentioned that Jesse Gordon was full of crap; I am in fact the one who is full of crap. I was misinformed when I made my the statement. Jesse is a fair and attentive author, and would never do anything to jeopardize the well-being of myself or my fellow characters. There's also no truth to the rumor that he threatened to delete me, nor is he waiting patiently with his finger above the delete key as I make this statement. Thank you for your understanding."

He crumbles the paper, tosses it off-screen, and sits sulking at his desk.

"Okay, it's official," I say, restoring Eva's window. "Your new friends are *weird*." I want to say more, but we're pulling into the Toepoint parking lot. I spot Lily, her gym bag slung over her shoulder, hopping out of her mom's car. She sees me and waves.

"Well, I should be going," says Eva. "My mom's taking me clothes shopping today."

"Wish I could be there," I say. "TTYL, babe."

"TTYL."

# Breakfast at My Place

**@jan**

If you look up lethargy on Wikipedia, you'll probably find a picture of a Kounicova, tousle-haired and groggy. Monday mornings are about as welcome as termites in our home. Not that we have anything personal against Mondays. It's just the timing—as in my family and I are still on Brno time. We haven't Americanized in that respect.

This morning begins like all the others, with my dad lurching out into the living room and rasping, "Time to get up."

I lift my head, open my eyes, yawn. I watch in mild fascination as Dad moves across the living room and into the kitchen with zombie-like coordination. I can hear plates and mugs being set on the table; as usual, Mom has gotten up five minutes early to pull the bread and cold-cuts out of the fridge.

"Come, Jan," I hear her say. "Time to get up."

As if I didn't hear Dad the first time.

I move from my bed to my desk in a single rolling/rotating motion. Once in the chair, I straighten into a somewhat more respectable posture as I wiggle the mouse and wake the computer screen. My SuperMegaNet windows are lined up on the right. I can see Eva's already awake and is blow-drying her hair. She waves, smiles—she's a total early bird. I don't know how she does it.

Theo and Ernie, on the other hand, are night owls, and while I know Theo, regardless of how much or how little sleep he got last night, will be dutifully arising in a few minutes, Ernie looks totally bricked, his arms and legs tangled in the blanket, his mouth hanging wide open, his hair sticking out at all the wrong angles. In the week I've known him, I've never seen him awake in the morning. I wonder how often he makes it to school on time.

"Jan!" Mom calls. "*Nasnídat se!*"

I can tell she's getting impatient because she's losing her English.

I go into the kitchen and seat myself at the table. Mom's poured coffee for Dad and herself, tea for me. In addition to the meat and cheese, there's butter, jam, honey, and rolls—my mom's attempt at serving a traditional Czech breakfast even though none of the food's homemade.

We sip our coffee, our tea.

I start to butter a roll.

Dad clears his throat and asks, "So, where did you disappear to last night?"

The knife eludes my hand and ends up falling onto the floor with a loud clatter.

"Last night?" I ask, leaning over to pick it up. I hope to God my parents didn't catch me uploading to Theo's place.

"We saw that you'd arranged the pillows under the blanket," Mom says. "We figured you'd run away."

My dad chuckles, takes another sip of coffee.

I use the dropped knife as an excuse to go over to the sink. As I run it under the cold tap, I try to determine just how much my mom knows. She's got a gruff way of putting things, and it's sometimes hard to tell when she's being serious and when she's not. I thought I'd positioned my desk and dresser in such a way that it's difficult to tell whether or not I'm sleeping in my bed, but apparently that isn't the case. I might be busted. My parents might have seen me upload. Worse, they might have been poking around and found my cache of sexy retro babes. Oh, stupid, stupid Jan! I always assume they disregard me when we're at home after school and work. They hole up in their room, I tuck myself into my corner, and we don't speak to each other unless it's to say "goodnight." I always thought our respective worlds were separated by classic Czech formalities. Even when they pass by, to or from the kitchen, they never look in my direction. But that doesn't mean they were never watching.

It's a revelation.

It's a nightmare.

I hate this apartment.

Back at the table, I try to sound amused as I ask, "Why would I run away?"

Mom looks at Dad, Dad looks back, and I can tell they had one of those discussions last night involving finances (or lack thereof), goals, timetables, and the like.

After a moment, Dad sighs, slips cheese, salami, and a dollop of honey between two slices of bread. He takes a hearty bite. "I promised you and your mom it would take six months to turn things around here in America. It's been two years. I've moved us from a nice house in Brno to a decent apartment in San Angelico, to this cramped hotbox while I try my darnedest to make the business work. Now you're a week at a new school, with new teachers to mind, new friends to make..." A bit of honey trickles down his wrist; he licks it up. "I thought you'd finally had enough and decided to strike out on your own."

He's joking. I know he is. And yet he's testing me. That's how he does it. "Your mom and I thought you ran away" means "Are you okay? Is everything fine?" He knows I'd never just up and leave like that, and it has nothing to do with my being only twelve.

"I stepped out for a while," I say, hoping I won't have to out and out lie. My parents brought me into this world. They've always treated me right. I respect them greatly—but it would be asinine to tell them with a straight face that I've been uploading and downloading from the Internet. They'd think I was making it up as a cover for something else. Drugs or alcohol. A late-night job in a questionable part of town, maybe.

There's a tense silence in the air. This could turn out to be One of Those

Mornings.

But it doesn't.

Dad starts chewing again—as if the passage of time is directly related to the predigestion of his food. "Sounds like the boy merely has a healthy affinity for fresh air." He winks at me when Mom isn't looking.

Mom smiles, though not as easily convinced as Dad. "You didn't hitchhike back home?"

Stupid question. I force a laugh. "How would I do that?"

"Maybe one of those large foam hands," Dad offers. "You know, the ones you see at the ball games. You could stand on the runway and flag the planes down."

Mom slaps him on the shoulder. "Don't tell him *how*!"

"*Promiňte, promiňte!*"

I watch my parents play-fight, Dad dodging as Mom pinches his cheek, and I realize I'm off the hook.

I can breathe again.

Breakfast winds down. After a while, Mom leaves to get ready for work while Dad and I finish stuffing our groggy faces. Afterward, we put the leftovers away, set the dishes in the washer. Then we tag-team the bathroom.

I'm quiet during the car ride to Boca Linda High. Ernie often says I'm too much like Theo in that respect, but he's only partly right. Theo's shy as a wallflower; I'm just...homesick, thinking of Brno most of the time, remembering this little pub Dad used to take me to after work. They let me taste beer there. I never got drunk or anything, but it felt good to be included with the men. Here in America there are so many rules. I know hindsight is clouding my judgment, but it feels like all you can do here is go to school, then straight home, wait for your parents to get off work, go to bed, then wake up the next day to do it all again. At least, here in San Angelico. It's so...big. There are people everywhere, but none of them have any time for you.

My parents are quiet, too. I know what they're thinking. They want this to work, but as time passes it seems less and less likely that'll happen. Still, this morning could have been *such* a homesick one. Dad turned it around. I owe him.

# Schoolyard Logic

**@theo**

Someone's getting creamed on the front lawn. The large swarm of teenagers chanting, "Fight! Fight!" makes this obvious as my mom and I pull up in front of Boca Linda High.

"Oh, my goodness," Mom says, looking like she doesn't want to let me out of the car. "Maybe we should drive around to the other side of the campus."

I shake my head. "I'll be fine."

"I don't know, Theo..."

But I'm already grabbing my backpack and making my way out. I wave goodbye as I close the door, hope she won't sit there with the car idling until I'm inside the building. I'm a high school freshman now. I'm entitled to see the blood and guts like everyone else—without my mommy's supervision.

I walk along the sidewalk, heading toward class, sneaking glances over my shoulder until Mom finally pulls away. The instant she's out of sight I change course, stepping from the concrete and onto the grass, into the melee. Everyone's bleary-eyed, their hair still wet from their morning showers. I smell shampoo, deodorant, cologne, breath mints. I try to push my way through, but the mass of bodies won't yield. The few boys or girls who acknowledge my presence do so in a way befitting someone's pesky younger brother.

"God *damn!*" says a senior in front of me, to his pal. "Did you see that blond chick that just pulled up a couple of minutes ago?"

"Which one?" asks his friend.

"The one in the Prius. Dropped off her little brother."

"Oh, her. Hells yeah I saw her. Must be a college cheerleader."

"Had to be. Fit as funk. I was just *waiting* for her to get out and show off that booty."

"You and me both."

The boys exchange high-fives, then glance back at me. An "aw, heck!" expression crosses both of their faces—they must not have realized I've been standing right behind them while they fawn over my *mom*.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn away from the senior jerks to find Ernie's standing next to me. He's wearing sunglasses.

"Yo," he says.

I blink (out of my peripheral vision I can see the seniors sidling away). "What's with the glasses?"

Ernie glowers at me. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's just that it's seven forty-five in the morning." And you look like you're trying to hide a night of binge drinking.

"So, what? Am I not cool enough to wear shades when it suits me? Is that privilege reserved for rockers and movie stars only?"

"No, I..." I trail off, lost for words.

Ernie sighs and shakes his head. He adjusts his backpack. "Sorry. Long night."

"Oh." Right. He's an insomniac, too. He probably got five hours of sleep last night—though his midnight marathons are intentional. Mine aren't. And even when I've had a bad night I don't snap at people when they ask me why I'm wearing sunglasses in the morning.

No matter. Eva's coming up to us now. She's fresh-faced and energetic, wearing her usual warm-up suit and sneakers combo, her ponytail bouncing cheerfully with each step.

I catch myself beaming and waving dumbly. "Good morning."

She nods casually at me, gestures at the crowd. "What's going on?"

"Fight," Ernie answers, trying unsuccessfully to jump up and down so he can see over everyone else. Each time he jumps, his grandpa sweater gets stuck in a roll of fat, and each time he tries to pick it out without looking obvious.

Eva rolls her eyes distastefully. "How mature."

She walks away. I watch her go, disappointed. I shouldn't have smiled so eagerly when I said hello. I should've opened with a joke or something. I should've shown my own initiative instead of just standing and gawking like everyone else—

I look at Ernie again. He's stopped jumping, but is still out of breath from the exertion.

"I can't see anything!" he breathes.

I think I hear someone getting punched.

I say, "I think I hear someone getting punched."

"That's it." Ernie charges forward. "I've had enough of standing out here in the boondocks."

Head down, elbows braced ahead of him, he uses his bulk to open a path; I tag along in his wake. A couple of rude excuse-me's and a wheezed, "Hey, that fat kid elbowed me in the balls!" later and we reach the inner circle. Two senior boys are thrashing around, bits of mud and grass (and a little blood, I think) staining their clothes. One is brutish, wearing a letterman jacket; the other is a tank top-wearing pretty-boy. Both are needlessly musclebound.

Ernie and I watch in detached fascination as the pretty-boy is tenderized before our very eyes. Somewhere at the crowd's perimeter, I can hear teachers and custodians shouting for everyone to disperse. None of us listen, though, and so the adults continue trying to out-yell the adolescents. They either don't know or don't care about the schoolyard code—they act as if we're hindering the process when, in fact, we serve a crucial social function. We're here to bear witness, to ensure completion, to demand blood before we're locked away in our stuffy classrooms for the day.

The brute dodges a swing, retaliates with a well-placed punch in the pretty-boy's face. Cartilage is cracked, teeth are dislodged; the boy's hair is terminally ruffled. He goes down.

The crowd goes wild, not caring that there's now a bleeding, whimpering human being laying on the lawn. In a moment we're all going our separate ways. After all, the warning bell is about to ring.

"That pretty-boy had it coming," Ernie says as we head towards the main building.

"How's that?" I ask.

"Look at him. Tall, pretty, strapping."

I glance over my shoulder. The school nurse is trying to pick up the boy's missing teeth with a napkin. In the background, one of the security guards is chasing after the brutish kid, who's launched into a parkour escape routine. "Not so pretty anymore," I say, facing forward again. "Why do you think he had it coming?"

Ernie removes his sunglasses and tucks them into his pocket (hall monitors like to cry wolf over things like that). "He gave off the impression that he can take care of himself. Did you see his bulging arms, his massive shoulders? They were screaming, 'With guns like these, I *dare* you to try kicking my ass!' Sooner or later someone was bound to accept the challenge."

"So, you're saying he likes to pick fights."

"His *guns* like to pick fights. It has nothing to do with him."

I try to wrap my brain around the concept. "Just because he's built doesn't mean people automatically pick fights with him."

"Oh, it does." Ernie stops in front of his locker. "Muscle studs get into fights for the same reason fat kids don't."

"What reason is that?"

"Fatness is a handicap. You'd never hit a handicapped kid, would you?"

"No, of course not."

Ernie starts fiddling with his combination. "Why not?"

"It'd be messed up. He's handicapped."

"Ergo, you wouldn't hit a fat person. If I tell you I hate your shirt, you'd be like, 'Lay off you fat frick,' and that would be the end of it. If I was tall and muscly it'd be bloody nose and black eye time."

I say, "That's stupid. Fat kids get into fights, too."

"Look at Kevin Smith." Ernie continues to fiddle with his combination. "He basically tells his fans to suck his dong whenever he does a Q&A. And they love him for it."

"That's because Kevin Smith is famous."

"It's because Kevin Smith is *fat*. And because he's got glasses. He's got a double handicap. He can be twice as obnoxious."

I fold my arms. "Is that why you're an obtuse loudmouth? Because you're fat?"

"Yup."

"I thought so."

Ernie finally gets his locker open. There are bags of M&Ms and chocolate chip cookies stacked high. Ernie grabs one of each and stuffs them into his backpack. He closes his locker. “Look around you. Watch the jocks versus the fat kids in the coming weeks and months. Jan’s screwed. He’ll get a black eye before the year is out. Eva, she’s lucky. She’s a girl. Picking a fight with her would be messed up—like pushing a baby into a well.”

“What about me?”

“You’re good because of the glasses thing.”

The warning bell rings. I start down the hall. Behind me, I can hear Ernie ripping open a bag of cookies.

It’s probably a good thing Eva left earlier.

# Janspeak

**@jan**

Eva's burning a hole in my head with her gaze. I'm trying to be nonchalant about it, but it's obvious I'm pretending not to watch her watch me as I sit slumped in first period English and wait for roll to be called. Every other glance, she smiles at me, waves, her ponytail bouncing cheerfully. I wave back the first time; after that it becomes redundant, so I just nod, shrug, and wonder what it was I did or said that got her all into me.

I was kind of hoping that it was the novelty of SMN, that Eva was just temporarily infatuated with the naughty aspect of always-on social networking—but that's becoming less and less likely with each glance, each smile, each wave. She *did* sneak into my room that night. I guess I'm intrigued by the fact that a girl wants to see me in my underwear, but Eva...well, not to be mean, but she's got major bug eyes. I'm not trying to insult her, nor do I want to humiliate her in any way. However, I don't think I could ever find her cute enough overall to warrant us becoming anything more than school buddies. Plus, with the ponytail, the warm-up suit and sneakers combo, there's a little too much pretension there. Like, I'm discovering as I go along, the jocks who wear their letterman jackets every day, every week, every month.

I pay her another quick glance.

She's still looking at me.

I avert my gaze, trying to pass myself off as uninterested but not impolite. This is a first for me. How do you get a girl to un-like you without hurting her feelings? And an American girl, at that?

The teacher—Mr. Johnson—strolls down the aisle, calling off names. "Liza Homma?"

"Present," answers Liza.

"Mark Howard?"

"Present," answers Mark.

Mr. Johnson passes my desk, his pencil poised over his clipboard. "Jan Kounicova?"

I try not to wince at his exceedingly bad pronunciation of my name. "Actually, sir, it's pronounced *Jan*."

Mr. Johnson stops, turns, blinks at me. He's totally a vanilla schoolteacher, from his plain white collared dress shirt to his conservatively-combed thinning hair to his totally average features and inability to grapple with anything outside his

immediate comfort zone. I can tell from the look on his face that instead of, "Actually, sir, it's pronounced *Jan*," he'd heard, "Ecktwoolee, sair, eats pdonounsed *Yawn*."

"That's cute," he says, mildly annoyed. "Now lose it."

"Lose what?" I ask.

"The Chekov impression."

I don't know who or what Chekov is.

Eva speaks up: "Mr. Johnson?"

Johnson looks over at her. "Yes, Ms. Taylor?"

"If you mean *Ensign* Chekov, from *Star Trek*, he's Russian. Jan is Czech."

Johnson looks back at me. "Well, Czech is like drunk Russian, right?"

The class chuckles.

Mark, seated in front of me, reaches back and pats me on the shoulder, pretends he's whispering even though he's not. "Don't mind Johnson. He's just trying to be friendly."

"Face forward," Johnson tells him. Then, hoisting his clipboard once again: "Okay, let's try this again. *Jan* Kounicova?"

"Present," I answer.

The other students chuckle lightly. I'm positive they all heard me say, "Pdesent."

Johnson finishes calling roll, then detaches the attendance sheet from his clipboard and hands it to me. "Here, Chekov, make yourself useful and take this to the attendance office."

So, I think to myself, Chekov is to be my American nickname. Should I be flattered?

I take the attendance sheet, rise from my desk.

Eva cranes her neck, watches me leave the classroom.

Out in the hallway, I breathe a sigh of relief. Without her stare the air actually feels cooler, the walls less constricting.

A door opens some ways down. Ernie steps out into the hall. He waves when he sees me, starts waddling over. I'd turn away, but the attendance office is in his direction.

"What's up, Janny Boy?" he asks when we're face to face.

I hold up the attendance sheet.

"Oh. Grunt-work." He pulls out a bag of M&Ms from his pocket. He tears it open and downs half of it in a single swallow. "Myself, I'm on my way to my locker. Forgot some homework."

I pay the M&Ms bag a wary glance. "You still making deals with that Robbie perv?"

Ernie shakes his head. "Screw him. I have a girlfriend now. She provides for me."

"Becky?"

"The Beckster."

I frown. "Don't you feel bad taking advantage of a girl you just met on

SuperMegaNet to support your eating disorder?"

"We all have our problems. Me and food. Becky and food. You and Bug Eyes."

"What do you mean?"

"Dude," Ernie says, "she's been giving you bedroom eyes all week. You haven't noticed?"

I *have* noticed. That's the problem. "No."

"You like chicks, don't you?"

"Yeah." Of course I do! Just not girls...like Eva.

"Then take it from me: Eva Taylor wants to make it with you."

"So? Just because she likes me I'm supposed to like her back?"

"Why not?" asks Ernie, looking genuinely curious.

I shrug. "She's fine as a friend, but otherwise she kind of scares me."

Ernie thinks about this for all of two seconds, then scowls. "Is it the bug eyes thing?" He puts his hand on my shoulder. "That's shallow, Jan."

"*You* use Becky for snacks," I point out. "And you're getting food coloring on my shirt!" I shrug him off of me.

"That's not true. Me and Piglet have a thing going. Nothing like the sparks you and Eva would have, though, if you two hooked up."

"If you think she's so great, why don't *you* get with her?"

"She doesn't want me," Ernie answers. "She wants a hard-body. A hunk. A muscled-up sex machine. You."

This is getting out of hand. "I should get going."

"You silly Czech Bastard."

I narrow my eyes. "Huh?"

"You're ignoring the chance to tap a fine cutlet—"

"Not that," I say, cutting him off, "the 'Czech Bastard' thing."

"Oh, come on it's not an insult. It's like when I call you 'jerk' or 'dork.' Like a friendly nickname."

"I already *have* a nickname."

"What is it?"

I sigh. "Chekov."

"The *Star Trek* dude?" Ernie throws his head back and laughs. "I can totally see that!"

"Thanks, fat boy."

He stops laughing, fixes me with a serious stare. "Hey..."

"It's only a *nickname*," I say, sarcastically. I walk away.

"Think about what I said!" Ernie yells down the hall. "At least get your hands up her shirt before you make your final decision!"

I duck into the attendance office—and not a moment too soon, as an annoyed teacher has stepped out into the hall and is demanding to know what all the racket is about.

I approach the nearest desk. "The attendance sheet from Mr. Johnson's class," I announce.

The girl behind the desk smiles at me. "Thanks," she says, and takes the sheet.

"Can I help you with anything else?"

I think for a moment. "Actually, yes."

"Oh?"

"Can you tell me who Ensign Chekov is?"

# Pet Monsters

**@theo**

"You're late," I tell Ernie as he joins Jan, Eva, and myself at our usual lunchtime table.

"It's no fault of mine," Ernie says. "I had to spend the last half hour in the principal's office explaining why I was 'cutting class' this morning."

"You were cutting class?"

"I *wasn't* cutting class. I was killing time."

"By wandering the corridors," Jan explains, trying to avert Eva's gaze by focusing full on his soggy ham and cheese sandwich.

I look at him. What an idiot. I mean, look at Eva. She's still embarrassed about what she did last week, so she's mostly turned off to the rest of us. But not to Jan. She's sitting right next to him, practically in his lap—and he's acting totally third-grader! If I had that kind of attention I wouldn't be staring dully at my lunch, I'd be treating my girl like a princess, a goddess, a bug-eyed angel. I wish she'd tried to spy *me* in my underwear.

"What were you doing wandering the corridors?" I ask Ernie.

He says, "The teacher was giving the class an extra ten minutes to finish Friday's homework. I'd already done all of mine, so I got a hall pass, stepped out for a breath of air."

"A mouthful of Skittles is more like it," says Jan, smiling amusedly.

"They were *M&Ms*," says Ernie.

I spoon lemon yogurt into my mouth. "Oh, much healthier."

"What is this, jerk around the fat kid day?"

"Sorry, continue with your story."

"Anyway," Ernie says, "the administration busted my balls over the whole thing, said I was slacking off, misbehaving even though I did all my work and even though I was going to return to class after the ten minutes were up. Can you believe that? They assume I'm just a lazy, gassy fat-ass who's up to no good if I'm not sitting quietly and waiting for the other students to get their act together—which is bull, because you know us fat kids need all the exercise we can get."

I can sympathize—about the stereotype thing, not the fat thing. I too always finish my work ahead of everyone else, and so have extra time to just sit and read or doodle while everyone else is still slaving away. If I'm not ticking off my teachers because I always look like I'm doing nothing I'm threatening the older kids because I'm small and smart and my mind hasn't yet been corrupted by raging hormones.

"Freaking high school lemmings," Ernie grunts. He wrestles open a bag of gummy worms. "They'd change their tune if I had my pet monster with me."

"Pet monster?" asks Eva, blinking at Ernie as if coming out of a daze.

Ernie nods. "Yeah. You know, if any of us had enough free time and money, we'd buy a laboratory and develop a pet monster to take care of those who oppose us."

"That's dumb," Eva says. "I wouldn't do that."

Ernie glares at her, then at me, at Jan. "You can't tell me none of you has ever daydreamed about having a pet monster."

I haven't. But if I did, I'd never tell anyone that such a childish concept was lurking in the recesses of my brain. "What does a pet monster look like?"

"Whatever you want it to look like. It's *your* pet monster."

"What does yours look like?" asks Jan.

"Mine's a Bang-U-Bot 5000," Ernie says proudly. "She's big-bosomed, beautiful, and she's programmed to be *great* in bed—right up until she bites your dong off with her bare teeth."

Jan makes a face.

Eva rolls her eyes and looks away, at one of the other tables.

I ask in deadpan: "Ernie, why would you want a sexy robot to bite off your dong?"

"Not *my* dong, you moron! The dongs of my enemies!"

"You know, you're talking about a robot," Jan points out, "not a monster."

"Robots can be *classifications* of monsters. They don't have to be flesh and blood."

"Yeah, but when you say 'monster' it brings to mind Frankenstein or Wolf Guy —"

"Wolf *Man*," I correct.

"Yes, Wolf Man. And Swamp Man. People like that."

"Frick you guys," Ernie says. "Theo, what's your pet monster? And don't pull any bulltish about you never having imagined one."

Resisting the temptation to correct Jan on the Swamp Man thing, I bite my lip and think hard. Personally, I hate monsters, in movies, on TV, and under the bed —but I'll play along because admitting I hate monsters would be like admitting I like Asia. The band. Which has already happened, and which has already brought me needless grief. "Um...I guess my monster wouldn't look like a monster in the classic sense. He'd be one of those killers you don't suspect at first, but it would slowly dawn on you that he might actually be responsible for a slew of vicious killings."

Ernie looks disappointed. "That's not a monster, Biclops, that's just a serial killer."

"Physically, yeah, but figuratively he's a total monster."

"Boring! Deform him somehow! Splice his DNA with a lawnmower! Slip a disgusting, super-intelligent parasite down his throat! Shove him into a giant vat of oatmeal and electrocute him!"

I raise an eyebrow. “An oatmeal man?”

“Sure!” Ernie says. “He’d have raisins where his moles used to be.”

“Ew!” gasps Eva.

“And his blood,” Jan says, snapping his fingers, “would be sucrose instead of glucose.”

“Sucrose?” I ask.

Ernie glares at me. “Table sugar. You *are* a gifted student, right?”

“I’m math and English, not science or biology or whatever it takes to conceive an *oatmeal man*.”

“This isn’t science,” Eva says, shooting me a knowing look, “it’s ridiculousness.”

“I agree,” I say, nodding back, smiling. For once we’re on the same level. It’s the sweetest moment of my life.

Ernie and Jan’s mindless jabber fills the background:

“We could call him Oates!”

“Harold Oates!”

“Oates: the high-fiber killer!”

“Eat your breakfast before it eats you!”

“Horror never tasted so good!”

Eventually, I raise my hand and flag them down: “Guys, guys, I don’t get it.”

Ernie blinks. “You don’t get what?”

“Why does this Oates fellow have to be evil just because he’s made of oatmeal?”

“Duh! He has sucrose for blood! That’s, like, the opposite of glucose, making him a giant oatmeal cookie. He can’t eat other cookies—that would be cannibalism! He has to eat *people*. It’s a wicked reversal. Breakfast eating you instead of you eating breakfast.”

“Trust us,” says Jan. “If oatmeal could walk and talk, it would eat you just as readily as you eat it.”

Eva narrows her eyes. “Regardless of the fact that if an oatmeal man tried to eat me all I’d have to do is grab the nearest blow dryer and aim it square at his face.”

Ernie frowns. “You’re no fun.”

Eva grins in triumph. “Nobody likes dried oatmeal, Ernie.”

I giggle alongside her.

“Too analytical for your own good,” Ernie sighs. “Both of you.”

## Does Eva Really Like Me?

**@jan**

It's really bothering me, what Ernie said about Eva's liking me. I mean, it's not as if I hadn't noticed—but if it's obvious to him that a Bug Eyes has a crush on me, then it must be obvious to a lot of other people, too. And I don't know if I want that. To a lot of older kids it's the most important thing in the world to be going with someone as soon as you start high school, but I don't want to do that just to do it. I don't need to fit in that badly. Not yet.

I'm going to confront her. I've been sitting here at my computer for an hour, waiting, doing homework, waiting. Finally I see motion in her webcam frame, her bedroom door opening, closing. She's just gotten home. She smiles at me as she unloads her duffel bag.

Here I go.

"Hi, Eva," I say.

"Hi, Jan," she replies, and starts to say something else—

—I cut her off before my brain can impose any shyness on me. "Do you like me?"

She blinks. "What?"

"Do you, you know, *like* me?"

"Ew, no!" she exclaims, too quickly. Her face reddens; she seems to catch herself. "I mean...no, I don't like you. What gave you that silly idea?"

"But I thought..." I trail off, puzzled. I wonder if I came off as too cocky, as if I'd *expected* her to like me. I wonder if maybe she never liked me at all, if maybe all this has been in Ernie's head. Has it? "I, er, that's okay, because I don't like you either."

We blink at each other. I can't see my own face, of course, but I'm sure I'm blushing just as badly as she is.

After a moment, she says, "Um...okay."

I'm flustered. I really don't *like* like her, but I still like her, if you know what I mean. It's on the tip of my tongue to clarify this, but the dreaded shyness has overcome me, and so I bury myself in my homework. A moment later, when my dad comes walking through the living room, I use him as an excuse to leave my nook, follow him into the kitchen. He's talking about something, but I'm not listening to a word he's saying. I'm wishing Ernie wasn't so blunt so that I could talk to him in a meaningful way about Eva; I'm sneaking glances at my computer screen every few minutes and wondering when Theo is going to get home so I can

perhaps ask him his opinion. It makes sense: he eyes her as much as she eyes me. Maybe there's something to that. If he'd get *home*.

I poke my head into the living room. I can see his SMN messenger window is still dark. Ernie says his mom drags him to the gym after school. Why does he go, anyway? He's not on any sports teams, and he always dresses in clothes that are two sizes too large for him. No point in working out like that if you're going to cover up. He likes to hide, though.

But I'm not in the mood for hide-and-seek right now.

Theo! Where are you?

## Waiting for Theo

**@eva**

Okay, so he's ignoring me. Maybe I overreacted with the whole "Ew!" thing, but he doesn't have to *ignore* me. He's not even at his computer anymore; he's in the kitchen making small talk with his dad. He never makes small talk with his dad.

I sit at my computer a while, check my e-mail, my Facebook—I'm pretending I'm not actually waiting to see if Jan comes back so that I can...what? Apologize? Confront him? Throw myself at his knees and beg him to like me back? What's wrong with me? I've never done this before. How do you tell if it's love or infatuation? Why's Jan so special? Why is *he* the one who's activated this mushy alter-ego inside of me?

I need to sound off on someone. I get up from my desk and pull off my warm-up jacket, kick off my sneakers and socks. Lily's good at listening, but she's not online right now. Neither is Summer—which is probably a good thing. I already know what she'd tell me if I mentioned my crush on Jan: "Sure, he's got the bod, but he hasn't got any direction. That usually means trouble, babe." I don't really know anyone else on SMN. Not well enough to talk about this kind of stuff. Offline, my parents are out of the question. They'd flip if they knew I was event *thinking* about boys. Ernie...absolutely not. Theo...hmm. Maybe. Too geeky for his own good, but sensitive. A good listener. He always seems to be the most fair-handed whenever an argument erupts during lunchtime.

I glance at his SMN window. He's not home yet.

Darn it.

Someone knocks on my bedroom door.

"Yeah?" I call out.

"Homework, sweetheart," my dad calls through the door. "And don't forget to get washed up for dinner. Cordon Bleu tonight."

"Okay, daddy."

I'm not in the mood to shower right this instant, but it'll give me time to think things over. And maybe Theo will be online by the time I'm done. I start to undress—I catch myself with my shirt halfway off, remembering the "always on" nature of SMN.

"Take it off, baby!"

I look at my computer screen. Ernie's smiling at me and giving me a thumb's up.

Scowling, I rearrange my shirt. I reach for a pair of shorts; I toss them over my

webcam.

Ernie moans in disappointment. “Goddamn tease!”

“Screw you, Ernie,” I say, and glance at Theo’s messenger window again. “If you sneak over here while I’m in the shower I’ll clobber you!”

“Don’t flatter yourself, sweetness,” Ernie says. “I only download on girls with actual boobs.”

It’s such a crude, Ernie-ish thing to say, but I’m not listening. I’m thinking to myself: Theo, where *are* you, darn it?

## Therapists Are Good at Saying Nothing

**@theo**

"We talked about monsters today," I tell Dr. Freud.

"Monsters, eh?" he asks, bemused. (His name's actually Ron Chandelier; I just call him "Dr. Freud" because he thinks I think about sex too much. Or not enough. It's usually one extreme or the other depending on his mood.)

"Yeah," I reply.

"Are you afraid of monsters?"

I shake my head. "Monsters aren't real."

"But are you afraid of them?"

I glance around Chandelier's office. Everything's made of leather and mahogany. Faint wisps of cigar smoke cling to Chandelier's hair, his clothes. "It's not so much the idea of monsters, but the fact that I lied about mine."

"Yours?"

"My friend asked me what my pet monster would be. You know, if I could create a monster to walk around with me and take care of the people I don't like. I didn't want to admit mine, so I made up something about an ordinary guy who turned out to be a serial killer. But really..." I trail off. It's hard to say.

"So, you *do* have a monster?"

"Sort of. But it...they're not my pets."

"And you're afraid of them?"

"I didn't say that—"

Chandelier shifts to rapid-fire mode. "Spit it out, lad."

I sigh. "My monsters are...old people."

"Old people?"

"Yeah."

"How old? Middle-aged? Elderly? Older than you?"

"Elderly people."

"Go on."

"I...I have this recurring dream where I'm walking down the street on a Sunday and all the old people in my neighborhood are out taking their afternoon strolls. There's this one guy in a buttoned-down suit and a big bowler hat. He's coming my way, and he's smiling at me, saying hello. I want to smile at him and say hello back, but my foot always catches on something, and I always end up stumbling forward and slamming into him. When we collide it's like punching a bag full of broken twigs and branches. I try to grab him, to steady him, but that just makes

things worse. His arms always snap off, his legs always buckle and collapse. We both go down. The first part of him to hit the concrete is his head, and it just bursts open, scattering brains at least five feet along the sidewalk. I'm trying to hold him together, but it just makes things worse so that by the time the paramedics arrive, all that's left is a gooey mess. Like stew."

Chandelier studies me quietly, smiling slightly. He looks like he's made some sort of connection—but I've been seeing him long enough to know that this just means his prurient half has kicked in. Ignoring everything I've said, he asks me, "So, how's the girl situation?"

I'm hesitant to answer. Chandelier has asked this before; he's adamant that I begin seeking female companionship as soon as possible. I don't exactly understand why. "The same."

"Oh, come now, my lad! You're in high school now! Surely a skirt or two has caught your attention?"

"High school girls don't like little boys."

"What did I tell you about letting your physical size dictate the size of your goals, your ambitions?" He tilts one of his earlobes in my direction with his finger.

I quote him: "'It's not your size that matters but how you use it.'"

"Exacto! See, high school boys rely entirely too much on their size—big on the outside, puny on the inside. The girls, unfortunately, judge their books by the covers. But you, *you*, my lad, I bet you have more spirit packed away in that little frame than ten football stars! You know how to talk, and you know how to *listen*. Start doing both, in no particular order, and you'll soon find the ladies lining up to meet you. Your inner size outshining your outer size. See?"

I don't, but I nod anyway. It's usually best when I do that.

"Good! From here on out, no more dreams about old people. If you see an old person walking towards you, turn him or her into a beautiful girl, put yourself with her on a sunny beach. Talk to her a little, listen to her, nurture her affinity for you, and bear in mind that whatever happens between you two in your head is perfectly allowable. Practice. Conquer in your dreams and you shall conquer in your life. This will be another of your cognitive behavioral therapy tactics. You get my drift?"

"I think so," I say, though I don't see the point of seducing girls in my dreams.

Chandelier nods and takes a deep breath, flexes his fingers, rises from his armchair. "Same time next week?" he asks, even though he knows I've been scheduled with him for the rest of the year.

"Yes, Mr. Chandelier," I say, getting to my feet.

Chandelier walks over to the door, opens it, and makes a grand gesture towards the hallway beyond. "Now, go out there and get yourself a cute little thing and tell me all about her next week!"

I shake his hand and leave the office, thinking to myself that only Ron Chandelier could've equated my old people dreams with girl troubles. I'm glad I haven't mentioned Eva yet.

My mom meets me in the lobby. "How'd it go?" she asks.

“We talked about girls,” I say.
She laughs.
Funny: she thinks I’m joking.

## When Friends Attack

**@theo**

They're arguing in my bedroom when I get home, Ernie and Eva (Jan's legs are slowly filling in—he's still downloading). They don't even notice me at first.

"I only downloaded," Eva says, "to see what *you* were up to!"

"I was seeing why Jan was downloading," Ernie replies. He gestures at Jan's legs.

"Oh, *right*. Like you weren't about to ransack Theo's kitchen for pudding and cookies before I caught you."

"Why you gotta bring fatness into this, huh?" Ernie spreads his arms; it just so happens he's holding a freshly-stripped Popsicle stick in one of his hands—

I clear my throat.

Ernie and Eva look at me, caught off guard.

"Oh, hello, Theo," Eva says after a moment. She smiles sheepishly, waves.

I set my backpack down, delighted by the fact that she's downloaded into my bedroom, but confused as to *why*. I ask her, "What are you doing here?"

"I...need to talk to you." She glares at Ernie. "*Alone*."

I face Ernie. "Why are you here?"

He shrugs. "I just wanted to be included."

I look at Jan's slowly-materializing legs. "And him?"

Eva shrugs, looks embarrassed. "Who knows?"

"You should know, Eva," Ernie says. "You know everything else about him. The layout of his room, whether he wears boxers or briefs—"

"Ernie..."

"What? All I'm saying is that you want to glomp him into next Tuesday."

My jaw drops. I can't believe that I can't believe he just said that.

"Ernie!" Eva cries.

Jan finishes downloading. He blinks at the three of us. He looks disappointed. "What's everyone doing here?"

Ernie seems not to have noticed Jan's arrival. Finishing where he left off, he folds his arms and fixes Eva with a knowing look. "Come on, we all know you like him. Nuts to what you told him earlier."

"You were *listening*?" Eva squeals, acknowledging Jan with a flaring of her bug eyes, looking angrily ashamed, ashamedly angry.

"SuperMegaNet, babe," Ernie replies. "Ultimate collaboration!"

Eva's had enough. She lunges at him, going for the jugular—but she's only managed to get a single surprised cough out of him before noticing that a fifth

person has just appeared in the room with us: Beta. He's got a couple of duffel bags with him.

Looking relieved by the distraction, Ernie wrestles Eva's hands from his neck and rasps, "Who's the metro dude?"

"Sorry to crash the party," Beta says, setting down his bags, "but me and Theo have to talk."

"Join the party," I grumble.

Beta waits a moment. When no one moves, he barks, "Alone, kiddos."

Jan looks even more disappointed. "But...but I just got here."

Beta smiles at him. "Cute accent—now beat it." He points at my computer. "Seriously, get a move on."

"Who is this jerk?" Ernie asks me, point blank.

"My, er, uncle," I say.

"Yeah? Well, I don't like him."

This is getting out of hand. "Just go," I say, and rush over to lock my bedroom door. Then I go to my desk and click my SMN messenger, sending Ernie, Eva, and Jan home. "We'll meet up again later, guys."

Ernie and Eva wink out within a few seconds; Jan starts dissolving an inch at a time from the scalp down. I wait for his eyes and ears to upload before I turn to Beta and ask, "What's the deal?"

"I need a place to stay," he replies, and goes over to my bed, tosses his bags down. He unzips one, flips it over and dumps a pile of hard drives onto the blanket.

"But you're not real. You said so yourself."

"I'm real. I'm just not *actual*."

I watch him for a moment. He's pulling all sorts of electronic goodness from his bags: hard drive cables, speakers, webcam, a beefy-looking laptop. "What's wrong with staying on the SMN server? I thought that's where you lived."

"Not anymore," he says, plugging in the webcam, firing up the laptop.

"What are you doing?"

He pulls more wires from another of his bags. "I'm going to setup a RAID. I need storage."

I run my hand through my hair. "Look, just because we played a few rounds of *Super Smash Bros.* doesn't mean we're, um, best buddies. If my parents catch me hiding some random guy in my room..."

"Hey, you're not my first choice. But desperate times call for desperate measures."

I frown.

This sounds bad.

# Digital House Guest

**@theo**

"Define 'desperate,'" I say.

Beta continues to set up his equipment on my bed (in the back of my mind I wonder where I'm supposed to sleep tonight). "Desperate—as in nowhere else to go. As in I tried to log in to my home server at Taurus just now and I got a 403 error. So, I remembered my little pal Theo and his Zen garden bedroom, and here I am. You're not on my buddy list. They won't think to look here. Could be nothing, could be something. Bottom line: I need a place to lay low until I can figure out what the deal is."

"Who's *they*?"

"Patent trolls, competing tech companies, church folk, human rights activists—you name it. They all want a piece of me to toss into their anti-Taurus, technology-will-kill-us-all narratives."

I do a little mental digesting. "I don't get it. How can anyone *get* you? You're virtual, a disembodied dude living on the SMN server."

"I'm also a *person*, thank you very much," Beta snorts. His appearance looks more finished than it was the last time I saw him. He's filled out more, dressed in camouflage combat fatigues and boots. This must be his gaming skin. He's got a pistol strapped to one thigh, a knife strapped to the other. I hope they're for show.

I sit at my desk, waiting. Eva's off doing her own thing; Jan's still downloading into his living room; Ernie's sitting glued to his computer screen, watching me. He sends me a text: "What the hell is going on?"

I start to type back, but Beta, hearing my key presses, raises one of his arms and points squarely at me. "Hold off on the texts for a few minutes, little dude."

"But I was just going to—"

"Let me get the firewall configured, then you can text to your heart's content, okay?"

"Um...okay."

I wait. After a few minutes tinkering with his laptop, Beta straightens and continues where he left off a few sentences ago: "Could be the activists again. They're treating this like an episode of *Supernatural*, like I'm some kind of spirit trapped in limbo, someone who doesn't know he's dead. They want to *help* me, to free me." He shakes his head. "They say I died in the accident last year, that this is just a digital rendition you're talking to, and not actually *me*. They want to pull the plug, end my 'suffering.' They want to trash the whole SuperMegaNet project, too.

Well, you know what I have to say to that?"

I shake my head.

Beta bends over and pretends to fart loudly.

The sound of Ernie's stifled laughter emanates from my PC speakers.

Beta straightens again, faces me. "My mom wants her little boy back. Taurus, they want to pretend their programmers didn't screw up. The rest, they want to pretend things like this can't happen. They all think virtual is *wrong*. Humans playing God and all that. They'd be perfectly happy to see me back in my original body, sitting crippled in my wheelchair and counting the days until the MS converts my nervous system to sludge."

"That sucks," I sigh. "Really, I sympathize—but why do you have to stay *here*?"

Beta winks. "Simple: You have a killer Internet connection. Who's your ISP, by the way?"

I glance toward the bedroom door. "Beta...it's been hard enough keeping SuperMegaNet a secret from my parents. How am I supposed to hide you for any length of time?"

"Look, you won't even know I'm here. I'm *virtual*, remember? I'll be on my laptop, behind a firewall. I'll need you to take a few messages for me, but that's all." He smiles. "Maybe we can hit up the Wii every now and then. Give it a few weeks and this whole thing will have blown over, I promise."

Silence passes between us. It's not a matter of me accepting or denying Beta's request; he's already set himself up. I merely have to cooperate peacefully or else sulk quietly in my own corner.

"Look, Theo," he says after watching me stew for a moment. "Lighten up. I've seen your schedule. You don't do anything but sit and study. You need a little variety."

"I'm not a hapless nerd, you know."

"Okay, I'm sorry. That didn't come out right. I'm just a little edgy right now. You'd be too if a human rights group was trying to kill you—"

Someone knocks on my door.

It's my mom.

"Theo?" she calls.

I shoot Beta a freaked-out look.

"No worries," he says, nodding, and clicks the "Enter" key on his laptop. Instantaneously he vanishes into thin air. I assume he's transferred himself to his laptop.

I think quickly, darting over to my Wii and flicking it on, grabbing one of the Wiimotes and bringing it with me as I open the bedroom door.

My mom peers curiously over my shoulder. "Who were you talking to?"

I hold up the Wiimote. "Wii Speak."

"Oh, wow. Did you get an upgrade or something? It sounded like there was actually someone else in the room with you."

"Sorry. I'll keep the volume turned down from now on."

Mom gestures at my bed. "Whose laptop is that?"

I glance over my shoulder. “Oh, I’m working on a server project for someone. It would’ve taken too long to download his files over the Internet, so he just loaned me his laptop.” It could be true. I design Web pages for paying clients in my spare time...although this would be the first server I ever built at home.

My mom seems to take my explanation in stride. “Oh? How’s it going?”

“Good. I’m learning a lot.” (Parents always like it when you say you’re learning.)

Mom smiles. “You never cease to amaze, Theo.” She leans in, kisses me on the cheek, straightens again. “I have Mr. Megalomoto scheduled for a private session tonight, so I’ll be in the studio until eight. Your father’s going to start dinner. Sound okay?”

“Sounds good, mom.”

She leaves.

I close the door. With my back pressed against it, I take a deep breath and glance at all the junk cluttering my bed.

It’s going to suck sleeping on the floor tonight.

## Reinstate Your Disbelief, Please

**@summer**

Sorry if I'm interrupting the flow, but I just *have* to get this out in the open. I now know why Theo and his friends rub me the wrong way (besides Ernie's always calling my baby doll "Bug Eyes"): they've permanently suspended their disbelief. They don't react to ludicrous situations and events like the rest of us.

They're not *real*.

"Of course they're real," Lily says, out of her workout gear for the day and into her usual sweats. She's sitting beside me on the curb in front of Toepoint. We're waiting for our ride home, watching the parking lot empty out car by car, watching the sun set below the horizon. I've got my netbook out; Lily's rummaging through her duffel bag and trying to find her iPod.

"I didn't mean it like that, you silly thing," I say. "Theo's real, he's just not... believable."

"Theo...the nerdy kid with the glasses we met online the other day?"

"Yeah. I was chatting with him just now. He told me some guy he met on SMN decided to move into his bedroom. I asked him why he let something like that happen, and he told me that this guy—Beta—lost his body in an uploading accident, that he was living entirely online, and that he was being chased by a human rights group. Now, do you think a normal person would listen to a story like that and go, 'Sure, let's have a sleepover?'"

Lily says, "Maybe Theo's just passive. A pushover. Maybe he doesn't believe what Beta told him, but he went along with it anyway because he didn't want to cause trouble."

"He should've told his parents," I say. "I should download over there right this instant and do it for him."

"Why? He's not your friend, he's Eva's."

"Hon, it doesn't matter whose friend he is. I *hate* seeing other people being trodden on." I bring Theo's SMN window into focus. "Don't let him push you around, Theo!"

Theo's pacing back and forth near his bedroom door; when he hears me, he looks at his computer screen and blushes.

"Unbelievable," I mutter. "No character at all."

"This is real life," Lily says, "not a book or a movie or a webfic—hurray! My iPod!"

I leave her to her playlist.

Three minutes later: “So...any idea if your mom’s actually interested in picking us up anytime soon?”

“She’s just a little late,” Lily replies. “Probably grocery shopping.”

Lily’s mom is notorious for doing all her shopping in one fell swoop. She means well, but the end result is usually a minivan so overstuffed with groceries that the only way you can fit in is if you’re a circus acrobat.

Speaking of which: Mrs. Kraemer’s minivan pulls into the parking lot.

And it’s bursting at the seams with food and toiletries in economy-sized packaging.

Lily and myself stand, flexing our arms and legs, rolling our necks—preparing ourselves for the act of contortion that will allow us entry into the minivan’s cluttered backseat.

A cheerleader’s work is never done.

## Carjam

**@theo**

Summer yelled at me—she's *inspired* me. She's darned right: I *shouldn't* let Beta push me around. I don't even know him, he doesn't even know me! He can't just move in here like this! I'm going to tell him off.

As soon as I ask Summer how.

I sit at my computer. I don't really intend to drop in on her like this, it's just the natural inclination that comes along with prolonged SuperMegaNet use. I'm already clicking the "Visit" button when I notice just how cluttered Summer's SMN window has become. Before I can wonder if this isn't the greatest idea in the world, I materialize in some sort of mobile storage closet, packed tight with boxes of breakfast cereal, rolls of toilet paper, bags of multi-grain snack chips—the backseat of a car, I realize. The SMN software has tried its best to arrange me in a suitable position, but there simply isn't any room—so I'm sitting half on the floor, half on the seat, facing the rear of the car, my left leg tucked beneath me, my right extended straight up along Summer's arm. My foot rests on her shoulder. I look like I was flash-frozen in the middle of a high kick. And let me tell you, it hurts like heck. Luckily I'm too embarrassed to feel anything but burning shame.

Summer's mouth drops open. "*Theo?*" she asks, incredulous, multiple exclamation points ringing in her voice.

From the next seat over: "*Theo?*"

I crane my neck. Between the mesh of a brand new laundry basket, I spot poofy brown hair, baby-blue sweats, way too much makeup—Lily, I realize.

I wave feebly with my right arm, which is wedged between Summer's seat and the door. I mouth the word "hi."

"Theo? What?" someone calls from the driver's seat.

"Nothing, mom," Lily answers, pressing her face against the other side of the laundry basket so that she can see me more clearly. "I thought I recognized someone on Summer's Facebook, that's all."

Summer leans in close, presses her mouth to my ear. "*What* are you doing here?"

The car hits a bump in the road; the shock causes the heel of my left foot to kick into my rear (heaven forbid we should hit a speed bump!). Shifting slightly so that my mouth is now in Summer's ear, I whisper, "I was just...I need to ask you...you said a few minutes ago not to let him—how would you suggest I go about kicking Beta out of my bedroom?"

Summer, switching our mouth-to-ear position again: "Duh, the same way you get rid of *any* unwanted digital house guest. Delete him, unplug his power cord, throw his laptop out the window while he's sleeping inside it."

"I don't necessarily want to hurt him."

"You said he had a gun and a knife."

I can already feel myself wussing out. "They might have been for gaming purposes."

"And they might be for carving up little geek boys who don't have a backbone —"

"What are you girls whispering about?"

Lily's mom again.

Lily starts to answer, but her mom cuts her off with a sudden gasp.

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Kraemer exclaims. "Whose leg is that?"

Summer glances down at me, an angry-deer-in-the-headlights look on her face. "Um...what leg?"

"The leg, *that* leg laying against your shoulder, Summer! Is there someone else in the car with us?"

"No, mom," Lily says. "It's probably just a broom or a mop that *looks* like a leg —"

"Oh-my-God, Mrs. Kraemer!" Summer squeals, jabbing her finger over the driver's seat. "Watch the road!"

Apparently Lily's mom is so distraught by the concept of a stowaway leg that she's taken her eyes off the road long enough to nearly rear-end the person in front of her. With little tact or grace, she slams her foot on the brake. Food and toiletry packages tumble down onto me. My head slams into the back of the driver's seat; Summer's netbook starts to slide off her lap and towards my face—I'm sure I'm going to die with $300 worth of Acer embedded in my frontal lobe, but Summer intervenes, catching the netbook, navigating the touchpad, and clicking the "Send Home" button, all in a single deft motion.

Before I wink out, she addresses me quickly but firmly: "Kick him out! Be firm! Don't let anyone walk all over you!"

I slip away in a wash of pixels. An instant later I'm back in my bedroom. On my computer screen, Summer has reseated her netbook and is removing several boxes of highly-jostled light bulbs from her lap.

"There's no one here but us, mom," Lily says, off-screen.

"But...but I saw a leg..."

Summer sends me a text message: "Next time, knock first, dork!"

I swallow hard, nodding, minimizing her SMN window. I rise from my desk, back out of my room.

Maybe Dad needs help with dinner.

## Dinner with Mr. Megalomoto

**@theo**

Dr. Chandelier is always telling me that one of the keys to effective cognitive behavioral therapy is converting worries from possibilities to choices. *You* deciding if and when you want to worry, *you* deciding what's worry-worthy and what's not. That's all good and fine for people with super-mega brain control, but for the rest of us getting CBT right is just one more thing to worry about. My mind has a mind of its own, and right now it's playing out a worst-case scenario. Oh, I'm standing here in the kitchen and cutting carrots with Dad, I'm functioning, physically, but the rest of me is upstairs trying to dismantle Beta's server setup. It's too late, though: a dozen government bad-asses have just come crashing through the window, one after the other in rapid succession. They surround me; half of them have guns aimed at my head.

"Theodore Ivanovich?" one of them barks.

"Present," I reply, shaking, raising my hand as if in class.

The government bad-ass nods to one of his associates, who steps over me, raises my other hand so that both my arms are extended above my head. A third government bad-ass pats me down; when he's finished, he lowers my arms behind my back and handcuffs me. In the background, the others are shoving Beta's equipment into a giant black garbage bag.

"Hey, guys, check this out," calls a fourth government bad-ass, this one sitting at my computer and browsing my files. "The kid's got *gigabytes* of illegally-downloaded MP3s on his hard drive. Asia, Arena, Spock's Beard, Dream Theater, Ezra, Yes, Blue Oyster Cult, Electric Light Orchestra, Glass Hammer, Marillion, Mike Oldfield, Porcupine Tree, Rush, Saga..."

The first government bad-ass scowls at me, shakes his head. "You're going away for a *long* time, Teddy—"

Dad clears his throat.

The government bad-asses yip and jump out the window. I blink and find myself in the kitchen once again.

That's right. Dinner.

"How was school today?" Dad asks.

"Okay," I say, shrugging, handing him spices as he calls for them.

"Your mom tells me you're working on a new server project?"

"Oh...yeah. It's a little something I'm doing for a friend. It's turning out real well."

"Geez, kiddo. HTML, JavaScript, Flash, PHP, Photoshop...by the time you're thirteen you're going to be working for Google. And I'll still be in my stuffy little office, taking down notes for Mr. Megalomoto."

"Aw, Dad..." It's sad hearing him talk like this. He belittles himself in a joking kind of way, but I think deep down inside he's a little threatened by my abilities. He was never advanced a grade in school; he sucks at math; his first job paid him ten bucks an hour, and that was at the age of seventeen. This year I've made five figures doing Web sites and Photoshop work. My mom handles all the banking and financial stuff—in addition to maintaining her own successful home business—and my dad just putters and feels less and less useful. But there *are* things he can do that Mom and I can't. Cooking, for example. He's really good in the kitchen.

I smile at him from across the counter, noting that in addition to the rice, veggies, and tofu for us he's also got beef kabobs going. That can only mean one thing. "Mr. Megalomoto's having dinner with us tonight?"

"Yes," my dad replies. "Again."

There's a hint of bitterness in his voice.

I change the subject back to something he can control. "Did you use turmeric in the rice this time?"

Dad brightens. "Good nose. Most people think it's marjoram."

"Stupid people."

"Turmeric is tricky. You want sweet-and-sour and not musty, especially when it comes to the rice..."

He starts talking spices, and I relax for a while, forgetting the whole reason I came downstairs in the first place. We set the table; Mom and Mr. Megalomoto join us.

Mr. Megalomoto is my dad's boss. Dad, well, he's Mr. Megalomoto's personal assistant, as well as Employee of the Year. We all know the plaque hanging in my dad's office has nothing to do with office skills, though. Mom is really good with acupuncture and aromatherapy, and she's really young-looking, takes real good care of her figure. It's long been known that Mr. Megalomoto—a married man, mind you—has had a crush on her since the very first company picnic. Mom handles this with carefully-choreographed nonchalance. Or possible naïvety, I don't know which. But it's because of Mr. Megalomoto's sessions with Mom that Dad keeps a job. It's because of Mr. Megalomoto that my parents decided to do the whole *shoin-zukuri*, traditional-style Japanese thing with our house. Not because my dad's Asian, but because he's sucking up to his boss. Who tips well. Really well.

I sit at the table with the others. We pray while Mr. Megalomoto digs in. Eventually Dad serves the rice.

"So, how was school today?" Mr. Megalomoto asks me, separating a piece of meat from his skewer.

"Okay," I reply.

"Your mother tells me you run a Web design company?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"Good, good." *Chomp-chomp, lick-lick.* "What sort of clients are you getting?"

"A few local businesses, some musicians."

"That's good. More American boys need to pursue computer sciences."

My mom smiles proudly. "Oh, Theo's being modest. Over the summer Asia Afrodesia's management asked him to re-do her Web site. *Asia Afrodesia*."

Mr. Megalomoto's eyes widen. "Really? That pop singer darling who was caught in the middle of that indecent exposure mess?"

Mom's smile falters. "Well, yes—but this was before that happened."

"I hear," Dad says, "she's entered rehab. Looking to make a comeback next year."

Mr. Megalomoto nods at me. "And you, young Master Ivanovich, you get to rake in the money keeping her Web site updated throughout the whole ordeal. I salute you. I salute you all." He raises his skewer into the air. "In this unpredictable economy of ours, it's the strong, cooperative family that will prevail over yesterday's head-of-household model. Each family member productive in his or her capacity. That's the way to do it..."

He goes on talking, but suddenly I'm not listening, because behind him, standing there in the hallway, is Beta.

I start in my seat, my knee hitting the table.

Beta peers into the dining room, mouths something at me—I think he wants food.

Mom, Dad, and Mr. Megalomoto have stopped eating and are now staring at me.

"Are you okay, dear?" asks my mom.

"Yeah," I reply. "I, uh, just need some water."

I rise from my seat, pretending to stretch when really I'm motioning for Beta to get the heck out of the hall and into the kitchen.

My parents eye me curiously for a moment, but luckily Mr. Megalomoto has taken another bite of his food and is dying to know where we bought the kabobs (even though time and time again we tell him my dad cooks everything from scratch).

I enter the kitchen (there are two ways in: through the dining room or from the front hallway). Beta is standing over the cooking range and sampling this and that. He's traded in his camouflage fatigues for shorts and a T-shirt.

I walk quickly over to him and whisper, "I thought you were *virtual*, not actual!"

"Yeah, but I still enjoy a bite to eat when I get the chance." He nudges me. "Get it? A *byte* to eat?"

I get it, but don't want to. "You can't be here! If my parents catch you, it's all over!"

"Relax. If they see me, we just tell them I'm your friend from school."

"You're a little too grown up for that."

"Okay, so I was held back my senior year. Big deal."

I grind my teeth. "Even if you *were* a friend from school, I didn't ask my parents' permission."

"What, you have to clear each and every person you have over?"

"Duh! I'm twelve!"

Beta narrows his eyes. "You're *acting* twelve." He takes an extra skewer, starts back towards the hallway. "I'll be upstairs. When you're ready to be more mature about this whole thing, hit me up for some *Super Smash Bros*."

He leaves the kitchen.

I swallow several times, trying to get rid of the impression that my heart is still stuck in my throat.

# Wakefulness Can Be Enlightening

**@theo**

It's 12:00 AM. Tuesday morning. In seven and a quarter hours I'm going to have to get up for school. I'll be lucky if I spend half the time asleep. God, I'm such a wuss. I should be tucked into my bed, not sprawled down here on the floor with my sleeping bag, a flashlight, and a stack of manga, pretending I'm camping out when really I just want to be *back in my own darned bed!* (Truthfully, I'd probably still be awake even if Beta hadn't shown up yesterday, but that's beside the point.)

I roll onto my side, fuming. There's an unwanted guest sleeping in my bed, and I don't know how to get rid of him. Well, I know of several "hows," thanks to Summer—but what if one of them kills him? Virtual or not, I don't want to *kill* Beta. I just want him *out*.

I look over at his laptop. The hard drive LED is flickering, mocking me. "Here I am!" it squeaks. "You won't turn me off! You can't turn me off! All you can do is hide in your bag on the floor and pretend you're not paying attention to me, but I can see you watching me, I can *seeee* you!"

Okay. Maybe the LED isn't actually *talking* to me. But I'm sleep-deprived right now. A lot of things can seem like a lot of other things.

Total *ugh*. I don't know Beta. He seems like a casual kind of guy—to a fault, actually—but what if he has a vicious streak? What if I kick him out and he gets upset? Like one of those disgruntled employees you hear about on the news. Their manager fires them, and the next day they show up for work with a shotgun, kill a bunch of co-workers before blowing their own brains out. I never added Beta to my buddy list, but he still has access to my room somehow. He's privileged, as he said, a programmer at Taurus—what if he decides to get revenge? What if he hacks my computer so that I get caught during an upload and have to spend the rest of my life virtual, just like him—

CBT, I remind myself. CBT.

Crawling out of my sleeping bag, I cross the room and sit at my computer, rubbing my face, ruffling my hair. I wake the monitor with a wiggle of the mouse; I load Audacious and click a random track in the playlist. Rush's "The Camera Eye" starts playing. I start Bluefish, load up a couple of PHP files. I start coding. It's one of my CBT techniques: pretend I have something I have to do besides sleep. That way, sleep will hopefully sneak up on me unannounced. And, I'm hoping, my mind will be occupied for a while.

A few minutes pass. It's kind of working, and kind of isn't. A lot of the worry

has dissipated, but I'm still sneaking glances over at my bed, hoping Beta will make an appearance so that I can kindly ask him to eff off.

I look at my SMN buddy list. Eva's window is dark, her status listed as "sleeping." Ernie's sharing an iPod and a box of sugar cookies with that Becky girl (I guess this means they're going steady). Summer and Lily are asleep. The Semantic Web chat room has a half-dozen geeks in it, but I'm not really in the mood for tech-talk.

"Another late night?"

Jan's window pops into view. He's holding a glass of water and is looking quite overdressed for bed (he's started wearing full pajamas ever since the incident with Eva). "Yeah," I say. "Can't sleep, as usual."

"You can borrow my weights," Jan offers. "Works for me whenever I can't sleep."

"No offense, but they'd take forever to download using your Internet connection."

"Maybe if we met in person one of these days?"

"We meet every day."

"I mean outside of school. We *do* live in the same town, after all."

"True. Hey."

"Huh?"

"Yesterday, when the three of you downloaded into my room...I'm sorry if I was rude when I kicked you out."

"That's okay. I should've asked first."

I consider telling Jan about Beta, but then think better of it. Just in case. "What did you guys need, anyway?"

Jan blushes. "Um...well...this is difficult to say. I don't mean to put you on the spot or anything, but..." Jan hems and haws, takes multiple sips of water. Finally, he gets it out: "Eva likes me."

No duh. "She does?"

"Yeah. But I don't like her."

That's...that's *wonderful!* "Oh? How come?"

"No reason in particular. I'm just not interested in her, you know?"

Breathe, Theo, breathe. Play it smooth, play it steady. "Yeah, I think I do."

"I'm looking for advice. I want to stay friends with her, but I don't want to date her. And I want to tell her that without hurting her feelings."

"Well..." I trail off, pretending I'm trying to think of something worthy to say when the words are already being whispered into my ear by a little mini-Theo who's dressed in a red devil suit and hopping up and down on my shoulder: *Fine! Good! Dandy! Have Jan blow her off so she'll come crying to us!* "Be direct. Tell her how you feel. It's always better to be up-front than to wait until her crush gets out of hand and she blames you for leading her on. If she truly is a friend, she'll respect your feelings." I don't know what half of that means; I heard it on a TV show once. But it sounds reasonable.

Jan seems to ponder this. After a moment, he nods and says, "That's exactly

what I was thinking. I guess I just needed to hear it from someone else. Thanks, Theo."

"No problem."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Jan leaves his desk, fades into the murky background of his parents' living room as he climbs into bed.

I close his window, lock my screen; I return to my sleeping bag, Beta temporarily forgotten as mini-devil Theo gently massages my ear.

"That's right," he coos, gently. "Rest up. Tomorrow is going to be a big day."

"What's tomorrow?" I ask him, even though I'm almost positive he isn't real.

"Tomorrow is the first day of the end of Eva's crush on Jan."

I smile into the flickering darkness.

# Unintentional

**@jan**

I'm standing outside of Mr. Johnson's room with three minutes to go before the tardy bell rings when Mark comes up to me and, smiling, asks, "Waiting for your girlfriend?"

My first instinct is to respond with, "Eva's *not* my girlfriend!" but I remind myself that Mark doesn't know any better. He sees Eva staring at me throughout class, he sees me not staring back, and he automatically assumes I'm doing what I see the other freshman guys doing: feigning indifference to increase my appeal. This is why I need to have a talk with Eva. People are starting to think things about us that aren't true.

"Who's my girlfriend?" I ask, playing dumb.

"That Eva girl," Mark says.

"The one with the bug eyes?"

"Hey, you wait. I bet she's a late bloomer, one of those girls who blossoms once she hits sixteen."

"She's not my type."

Mark shrugs. "What other options do you have? High school girls always go for older guys. *Sometimes* they'll date a boy their age—but you *never* see them with middle school dudes like yourself, whether or not you were skipped ahead."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me. I followed a senior girl around campus my entire freshman year. I wrote her letters, helped her with her homework, listened to her problems, gave her my advice. Who did she end up getting with? Some college dude who knocked her up on prom night and then dumped her over the summer."

"That's sad," I say, spotting Eva down the hall. "I'll keep it under consideration."

Mark glances over his shoulder, looks back at me, shrugs again. "Your call, Chekov. See you inside." He pats me on the shoulder and starts into Mr. Johnson's room.

Eva comes up to me. "Good morning, Jan," she says, smiling, stopping in front of me with a perky bounce that makes her ponytail go wild for a second.

"Good morning, Eva," I say. I smile back. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She looks like she's hoping I'm going to ask her to go steady. "Sure! Of course!"

I clear my throat. "I think we need to reassess our relationship."

"Oh?"

"Please don't take offense, but I don't like you. I mean, I *do*, but only as a friend. Well, I don't mean 'only' in a diminutive sense. I don't want this to limit our friendship. But I meant it yesterday when I said I don't 'like' you."

Eva's smile falters. She bows her head.

Behind her, down the hallway, Theo is approaching us tentatively. He has some sort of plush mini-devil Theo doll sitting on his shoulder.

I can feel the moment sticking uncomfortably, so I push on: "This is good, then. No mixed messages, right?"

"Right."

"I'm glad we could have this talk."

"Me, too."

"See you at lunch."

"See you at lunch."

Eva enters Mr. Johnson's room. I catch a glimpse of her face in passing. Her bug eyes are glistening; there's a tear trickling down her cheek.

Theo comes up to me. "How'd it go?" he asks.

"I made her cry," I tell him.

The plush mini-devil falls from Theo's shoulder. It makes no sound as it hits the floor.

## Making Girls Cry

**@theo**

I made him make her cry. I made him make her cry, and for a moment I was actually *enjoying* it. For a moment I was actually thinking to myself, "That's what happens when you throw your crushes at unappreciative dolts!"

And now I feel like crap.

Yeah, I don't want Eva to like Jan, but I don't want her to cry, either. I don't want her feelings to be hurt. I meant what I said to Jan about accepting or denying crushes early on. I don't know, it just makes sense to me—but is it the *right* thing for me to have told him? Did I somehow suspect that this was how Eva was going to react and push for it anyway hoping that in her emotional distress she would turn to me for consolation?

"It was going so well," Jan says, frowning. "I thought...I thought we had an understanding."

I don't know what to say. I'm *afraid* to say anything.

Jan glances down at the floor, where the mini-devil Theo plush doll rests at my feet. "Where'd you get that from?"

I look at the doll, only now aware that I've brought it with me from home (wasn't it a figment of my imagination?). Embarrassed, I quickly pick it up, stuff it into my backpack before anyone else can see.

Jan doesn't ask; I don't tell.

After a moment, he says, "I'd better get to class. See you later, Theo."

Simple Minds' "Cry" rings inside my head. I watch Jan go. He enters Mr. Johnson's classroom, veers off to the left. To the right, Eva is seated at her desk and is sitting with her head resting on the desktop. She's staring out at nothing. Her ponytail has lost its pizazz; her warm-up suit no longer sparkles. She's the saddest girl in the ninth grade, and her mood is quite possibly capable of physically dragging down the GPAs of those sitting around her. I imagine a phantom version of myself drifting into the class, standing beside her, offering her my hand, wanting to comfort her but feeling, more than anything else, like a sneaky jerk taking advantage of a rotten opportunity.

"I know that look," someone says over my shoulder.

I turn and find Mrs. Thrailkill hovering over me. She unwraps a piece of nicotine gum and pops it into her mouth.

"Good morning, Mrs. Thrailkill," I say.

"That's the look," she says, discarding my greeting with impeccable efficiency,

“of someone who’s tried to break up two of his friends so that he can get the girl, but who is now having second thoughts about purposely tampering with someone else’s crush.” She chews methodically. Waits.

“But they’re not together,” I say. “He doesn’t even like her.”

“And yet she chose him over you.”

“She might have chosen me, if she’d given me a chance—”

“Doesn’t matter, darling. The heart wants what it wants. You tried to drastically reduce the shelf-life of a crush and it made the girl cry. Are you pleased with yourself?”

I hang my head. I don’t even care how Thrill-Kill got the details so uncannily spot-on. She’s right.

She gestures down the hall. “Now, get to class before you’re late—and remember, you can always make an appointment in the counseling office if you need to come see me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, and walk away.

## Make-Believe Feelings

**@ernie**

"So, I was thinking about amputees the other day, and I was wondering, what's the deal when they die? Are their missing limbs waiting for them when they get to heaven? Is there a giant cardboard box with 'limbs' written in permanent marker on the side? Does God have the arms separated from the legs to make things more efficient? And what if you're a good person when you lose an arm, but you've become a *bad* person by the time you die? Does Lucifer send God your forwarding address, or does your being bad result in automatic forfeiture of all limbs as part of some kind of ironic punishment? Guys? This is serious business. Are you listening?"

Jan gives me his usual apathetic look and nibbles sullenly at his sandwich. Theo's staring at me, but I can tell from the glazed look in his eyes that he's a million miles away, tucked way down inside his over-sized shirt and pants. I don't know what the heck is going on, but these two are sending out mad downers, and it's beginning to spoil my lunch.

"Where's Bug Eyes?" I ask. "Did she find some cooler, slimmer, less-bespectacled domestic friends to hang out with or something?"

"I think I upset her," Jan says.

Theo hangs his head. Dunno why.

"What did you do?" I ask Jan.

"I told her I don't like her. She started to cry."

Oh, geez. Guilt trip. "She's just being a girl."

"I think I might have hurt her feelings."

"No, she hurt her *own* feelings. Listen..." I lean forward, twisting the top off an Oreo cookie and licking the creamy center. "I've been with Snorkel-Puss long enough to know that girls are all about make-believe feelings."

"*Snorkel-Puss?"*

"Becky."

Jan shakes his head. "That's the stupidest nickname I've ever heard. And you've only known her, what, a week? How does that make you an expert on girls?"

"Shut up, closet jock, and let me finish."

He scowls, but is otherwise agreeable.

I go on: "Becky's proclaimed herself my girlfriend. Now, don't get me wrong, she's killer when it comes to selecting which snack goes best with which YouTube video, but beyond that she's fat, she has a pig nose, and she laughs like a hyena. I've

never told her I love her or tried to put my hand down her shirt or anything. I've never done anything that would give *anyone* the idea that I want to be her boyfriend—and yet she's convinced herself that I'm her man. But somewhere deep down inside she knows it's just about the snacks. She knows and she pretends anyway. It's her own fault if she's become emotionally attached."

Theo finally becomes animated. "Still, you're using her for her snacks."

"I made my intentions clear from the get-go," I say. "If she insists on living in a make-believe world where me and her are lovebirds, well, that's *her* fault, not mine."

"But not saying anything can be the same thing as, er, *saying* something. You invite her over to your place all the time for junk food, you spend time with her, but you never tell her that you're not interested in her romantically—it doesn't matter that you're not *saying* it. She's going to think that you like her and that you're not just out for a few thousand extra calories to cram down your throat."

"That's not my problem." It's not. You get me, right? Of course you do.

Theo frowns. "I hope your little plan explodes in your face, fat crap." He gets up, grabs his backpack, and walks away from the table.

My mouth hangs open. I look at Jan. "Did you hear that? He said crap! Theo said *crap!*"

"Yeah," Jan says, and goes back to eating. "He did."

Theo's half-eaten lunch is still sitting on the table. I lean forward to inspect it—damn.

Nothing but vegetables.

## Beta's Babes

**@theo**

I think I finally understand the expression "anger breeds action." I didn't mean to ditch the guys at lunchtime, it just sort of happened. I was upset—I was upset about being upset. It's easy to get mad at Ernie. He's loud-mouthed, opinionated, fat, vulgar...fat. But it's not him, I know that. It's me. I'm mad at myself for wanting something I can't have.

Gym time with my mom helped. Usually I'm lukewarm to the whole idea of stretching, jogging, weights, calisthenics, and yoga because it was supposed to have cured my insomnia by now. Really, it only ensures a solid block of five or six hours' sleep a night, with the rest coming in on / off forty-five-minute spurts. Maybe, on days like today, it helps me focus. I can't say for sure. All I know is that I'm home now, jogging up the stairs and sort of seething in a laid-back kind of way, if that makes any sense. I want one thing as I breeze into my bedroom, close and lock the door behind me, toss my bags onto the floor: to stop being mad at myself.

Beta's crap is still cluttering my bed. I sit beside his laptop, sliding my finger across the touchpad to wake the screen. He's got an SMN window maximized; it frames a gigantic pool deck on which a dozen bikini babes are laughing, playing, bouncing all over the place. Beta's in the middle of it all, sitting poolside with a wine cooler and a busty blond in his lap.

Oh, my God, I think to myself. This is *so* wrong. He's gone and downloaded into some rich person's backyard and is using the place as his own private Playboy Mansion.

He sees me and gives a thumbs-up. "Hey, little dude!" He nudges his friend; she looks at me, smiles, waves. "That's my pal, Theo. Theo, this is Stephanie."

"Hi, Theo," Stephanie says, cheerily.

"Um...hi," I say, totally not staring at her boobs.

"What's on your mind?" Beta asks.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. "We need to talk."

"Sure thing. Come on over."

"I was thinking we could meet here, in private."

"Oh, don't worry, my girls don't spread anyone's business around."

"Okay, but...whose pool is that?"

"Mine," Beta says.

"Yours. Really."

My sarcasm must ring through loud and clear, because Beta rolls his eyes, says,

"No, I didn't download my way into some Irvine yuppie's mansion, if that's what you're thinking. This is my own personal chat room, 100% virtual."

My eyes boggle. "But it looks so real."

"I borrowed the game engine from *Deader Than Ever 2*, tweaked it a bit for display purposes. What you're seeing is just the scaled-down, OpenGL output. If you want to *really* experience the goodness, you have to go virtual."

"I'm happy being actual, thanks."

"I'm not talking permanently," Beta says. "Just for this session. You're basically uploading into my chat room here on my server instead of, say, in my actual apartment or whatever. It works the same as any other SMN transfer."

I lean in close, squinting, studying the screen. The textures look amazing. So do the women. I'm not sure if it's the former or the latter that gets me clicking the "Visit" button, but I do, and in a few seconds the layers of my bedroom are stripped away, replaced by clear blue sky, warm sun on sparkling concrete, cheery smiles showcasing brilliant white teeth, perfect skin on perfect bodies. I look down at myself. Aside from my colors looking a little shinier than usual, I'm indistinguishable from my actual self.

Beta makes room for me on his lounger. "Have a seat, buddy."

There are beautiful women everywhere, some tall, some short, some soft and curvaceous, others hard and athletic.

I sit hastily, cross my legs.

Stephanie puts her arm around me, ruffles my hair. "Oh, he's *so* much more adorable in person!"

Beta beams, winking at me. "Can I get you a beer?"

"No thanks," I say, trying politely to extract myself from Stephanie's embrace.

Watching me, continuing to smile, Beta says, "Relax. She's just a sprite, Theo—all of them are. And the booze, it's all pixels. The effects disappear once you download back home. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

Again, impressive, intriguing. But I'm not here for drinks or...Stephanie. "Beta, I need to talk to you about...about..." I trail off, freezing up, becoming a helpless doll in Stephanie's clutches.

"Tense all the time, huh?" Beta sighs, sends Stephanie into the swimming pool. Then he turns to me. "What's on your mind?"

"I want you out of my bedroom," I tell him.

"I'm not in your bedroom, I'm *here*."

"You know what I mean."

Beta sighs, frowns. "May I ask why?"

"Oh, I don't know," I say. "How about all that stuff you told me about the feds trying to hunt you down?"

"Okay, first of all I never said anything about the feds. Church folk, activists, yeah, but no feds."

"Still, you've got people after you, right?"

Beta shrugs.

"I don't want any of that coming down on me," I say.

It looks like Beta's having a hard time resisting the urge to tell me I'm overreacting. He manages it, though. "Does it really bother you? Is this why you were up so late last night?"

I blush. "Yeah."

"Dude, I'm sorry. I..." He trails off, thinks for a moment. "Look, I'm a Sagittarius. I tend to exaggerate. What I told you about the hunting thing, that's me worrying about worst-case scenarios. I like to be two steps ahead. No one's really *hunting* me right now, I'm just not interested in attracting any untoward attention. Now, if you don't want my equipment in your room, fair enough. I'll move out tonight, I'll find some other place to stay."

Oh, geez—

"Hey, who was the girl?"

"Huh?"

"The Marty Feldman-looking girl who was in your room yesterday when I first, ah, dropped by."

"Oh. Her name's Eva."

Beta smiles suggestively.

"It's not what you think," I say. "She doesn't like me. And anyway, I kind of made her cry."

"How?"

"I told my friend to break up with her—well, they're not dating. She just has a crush on him, but he doesn't like her, so I told him to tell her off in the hopes that she would get with me. Pretty low, huh?"

"Dude, that's standard procedure. What you told your friend, it doesn't sound like *bad* advice. Maybe the reason behind it was a little shady, but it's true: if you don't like someone back, you shouldn't leave them guessing, getting their hopes up for nothing."

"Still."

"You want my advice?"

I shrug, not saying yes, but not saying no.

Beta leans forward, starts counting off on his fingers. "First, lose the glasses."

"But I can't see without them."

"I'll hook you up with some New Eyes."

I blink. "I don't want new eyes." I don't think I do.

Beta laughs. "'New Eyes' is a brand name for corrective eye drops. Little nanotech workers re-shape your eyeballs and clear away the unnecessary junk floating around in your vitreous so the light can reach your retinas properly. I did it —well, when I used to be actual."

I squirm at the thought of little critters swimming around in my eyes.

"Second, new hairdo. Lose the part. Muss it up a bit with some gel in the mornings. Chicks like bedroom hair. Third, bulk up. Start jogging. Go to the gym."

"I do. Every day."

Beta looks surprised. "You got decent biceps? Pecs? A six-pack?"

"I'm average, I guess." I shrug, looking away.

Beta nods approvingly. He fingers my sleeve. "Stop wearing these ridiculously over-sized threads. If you're in good shape, stop hiding."

"I'm not hiding." I'm not. Really. I just don't see the point in showing off.

"Fourth: confidence. You have to start acting more assertive. Stop stepping out of everyone's way or taking the smaller slice of pizza when you're at a party. Also, women say they like sensitive men. This is a trick question. Don't fall for it."

I stand, putting on my best expression of casual indifference. "I should get going. I have homework, some Web site stuff to do, then bedtime."

Beta shakes his head. "You worry too much about sleep. Personally, I didn't get more than five hours a night when I was your age."

"But sleep is when your body repairs itself," I insist. "Less sleep means slower healing wounds, less digestive efficiency, a loss of elasticity of the skin—"

"All I'm saying is, there's plenty of time for sleep when you're old—or dead."

"I'll keep that in mind." I nod at Beta's laptop. "Now, if you don't mind..."

Beta shrugs, leans over and taps out a few commands before sending me back home. When I reappear in my bedroom, there's something in my hand that wasn't there before.

A bottle of New Eyes.

## Always On

**@eva**

I really don't want to do this. I shouldn't have to. I should have more self-control. But I don't. Every thirty seconds my hand moves of its own accord, clicking the mouse, swapping out my Microsoft Word window for Jan's SMN window. I hate him and I love him. I'm keeping tabs on him when I'm supposed to be doing my homework. It sucks. He told me off today, but I refuse to get it. What's wrong with me? I'm not an unreasonable kind of girl. Why do I want what I know I can't have? Why am I still going over the dozens of hypothetical things-to-say that might—*might*—make him possibly consider liking me?

I can't do this. I can't sit and stare wishfully all evening. It's ripping me to shreds. I glare at my SMN buddy list. It's done nothing but complicate things. No more. I'm getting rid of it right this instant. So what if I can't physically visit Summer or Lily or any of my other out-of-town friends? I can still call them or e-mail them whenever I want, and when I'm done I'm done. No more of this "always on" stuff. Jan can have his privacy back; Theo and Ernie, well, Summer was right: they're not for me. It was nice having them there my first week at a new school, but now it's time to move on with my life. I'm sure they'll find someone else to fill the gap.

I click the "Close Window" button. My buddy list disappears, though the SuperMegaNet icon is still in my system tray. I hover the cursor over the icon, right-click. The pop-up menu lists various options, but offers no way of exiting the program.

Okay. Option B. I right-click my taskbar and bring up the task manager. I scroll down the list of running programs until I find "smn.exe". I highlight it, click "End Process". I wait. Nothing happens. I try again, and again nothing happens.

Right. Option C. Into the Control Panel I go, with the intent to uninstall SuperMegaNet entirely. But when I highlight the program there's only a "What's This?" option providing a tooltip that reads, "Fix me."

This is ridiculous!

I crawl under my desk, grabbing and yanking the power cord out of the strip with a feral *rawr*. That ought to show the stupid computer who's boss! I crawl back out from underneath the desk—and I do a double-take. Somehow the computer is *still running*.

Without being plugged into the wall.

I swallow hard.

What kind of a program is able to keep your computer running without power?

# New Eyes

**@theo**

There are New Eyes in my hand. New Eyes where there were no eyes before. I have to admit, I'm a little puzzled. Up until now it's been my impression that SuperMegaNet is only for uploading and downloading things that already exist. This appears to be something from nothing—unless Beta uploaded it from somewhere actual before downloading it with me. Regardless, I'm impressed. Nanotech stuff is expensive. Usually only the movie stars can afford it.

I examine the bottle dropper. It looks real, feels real. There are instructions on the back: three drops in each eye at bedtime. Simple.

I remember seeing commercials on TV a while back for corrective eye drops. They were all the rage until a year or two ago. It seems odd that you don't hear about them anymore considering the relentless ad campaigns. Once or twice every hour during prime time you'd spot geeky-looking guys placing a few drops in their eyes, blinking, and finding themselves suddenly tanned and muscular and standing on a beach with throngs of cheerful women at their disposal. "Appreciate the View" was the official slogan. Apparently an intended, though highly unlikely, side effect of New Eyes is overnight Olympic conditioning.

"Go for it!" calls a tiny voice from below.

I look down. Mini-Devil Theo is clawing his way out of my backpack.

He toddles across the floor, tugs at my pant leg. "Come on, we *so* need a refresh!"

It's vaguely unsettling that there's a miniature plush version of myself talking to me. Where did I get a thing like this? Did I buy it, did someone give it to me as a birthday gift—

"Check it out." Mini-Theo takes off his shirt. He removes his miniature glasses, tosses them onto the floor, stomps on them. Then he faces the full-length mirror and flexes, squints. "Years at the gym with Mom, impeccable diet thanks to her health food streak...Eva wants a hard body? We've got one! And now that we no longer need any dumb old *eyeglasses* getting in our way, why, we're unstoppable!"

It kind of makes sense. I've never been a showoff. People should like me for who I am and not how I accessorize. But maybe there's something to the whole packaging thing. Maybe Eva's ignoring me because I'm ignoring *myself*.

I ditch my shirt. I stand side by side with my plush likeness. Both of us are admiring our physiques in the mirror (don't laugh; if you were ever a twelve-year-old boy, you've done this once or twice, too). I flex. Maybe I'm not all big and

bulging like Jan, maybe I'm more daint than beef, but I *am* in great shape. Why didn't I notice before? Why didn't I care?

I take off my glasses. Everything around me goes blurry. I have to step in close to the mirror to make out my features properly. I'm not used to seeing my face when it's not being framed by a pair of lenses. The effect is not altogether uninspiring.

"Eh?" Mini-Theo grunts, nudging my calf. "We could get her—we could *totally* get her."

I smile at myself. I'm going to do it—

—I'm going to get New Eyes.

# Uninstall

**@theo**

"Theo!" Eva calls from her SMN window. "Psst! Theo! I need your help!"

It's the tail-end of a dreamless night, about half an hour before I usually wake up for school. I sit up in my sleeping bag, rub my eyes, glance at my computer screen. It doesn't occur to me that I can actually *see* Eva's face clearly until I fumble for my glasses, stick them on my face, and blink in momentary confusion as everything goes blurry. At first I'm thinking I've got a major case of eye snot—then I remember the New Eyes, the nanobots swimming in my eyeballs, molding them to spec. I take my glasses off and look around the room. Everything is crystal clear. Even my floaters are gone!

Eva calls me again. I get up, walk over to my computer, delighting in the crisp details of the mouse pad, the keyboard, the neatly-stacked volumes of *Megatokyo* resting beside my bamboo pencil holder. "What's going on?" I murmur.

"You know your tech, right?" Eva asks.

"I guess."

"Hardware?"

"Sure. I built my own rig, Core 2 Duo, four gigs of RAM—"

"Good. Listen, I'm having some trouble with my PC. Do you think you could come over for a sec and take a look?"

The sound of heavy breathing and loud smacking noises fills the air. I glance over my shoulder, down at my sleeping bag. Mini-Theo is making out with a pillow and gasping, "Did you hear that? A *girl* wants us to download into her bedroom!"

I ignore him...though I admit the concept of visiting Eva's room is undeniably tantalizing. "Sure. Um, right now?"

Eva nods. "If it's not too much trouble."

"No, not at all. Hang on a sec."

I click the "Visit" button.

Mini-Theo, as I start to upload: "You're not taking me with you?"

"Nope," I reply, frowning, wondering again just where I got a plush doll of myself (and a *talking* plush doll, at that). Mini-Theo looks annoyed as he and the Zen of my room blink away. In their place: shag carpeting, trophy-lined walls—and a troop of life-sized *The Nightmare Before Christmas* dolls.

"Good morning," I say to Eva. (I try not to notice how Jack Skellington is smiling down at me in happy morbidity.)

Eva rises from her desk. She blinks at me. "Oh."

I blink back. "Oh, what?"

"You forgot your glasses."

"No, I didn't." I touch my face instinctively. "I have New Eyes."

"New Eyes?" Eva scowls. "You mean those eye drop things? I thought they were illegal."

"Really?" I swallow hard.

"Yeah. Something about the high occurrence of optical nerve rot. Geez, Theo, tell me your parents did their homework before they took you down to Chinatown—or wherever it was you got those things."

"I...I..." I'm going to be sick. "Beta gave them to me."

"I thought you were going to kick him out," Eva says, pertly.

"I was, but then we got to talking and—"

"Theo, he sweet-talked you."

"Oh, I don't think so. He's just an ordinary guy going through some hard times."

"Mm-*hm*." Eva folds her arms. "An ordinary guy—living in a laptop in your bedroom. Perfectly *normal*."

I can appreciate her sarcasm. But right now I'm more concerned about my eyes. What in God's name is optical nerve rot? Are my New Eyes starting to itch at the back? Is that excess fluid I feel applying pressure to my lower eyelids? Is that—

—I cut myself off, force myself to think about other things. CBT. "You said you're having trouble with your computer?"

Eva nods. "I need to uninstall SuperMegaNet."

"Really? Why?"

Eva starts to answer, but stops short when someone knocks on her door.

"Quick!" she hisses, her bug eyes bulging something terrible. She shoves me into the heart of the *Nightmare* troop. "Keep perfectly still!"

I do my best puppet impression, and I wonder what it is about me nearly getting caught every time I download into someone's room.

Eva goes over to the door, opens it, pretends she's just risen from bed as Mrs. Taylor steps slightly inside.

"Good morning, dear," she says. "Breakfast in five. Is all your homework done?"

"Of course it is," Eva says.

Mrs. Taylor nods approvingly. "Just to let you know, I've got some errands to run later, so your dad will be picking you up from practice today...is that a new doll?"

"Hm?"

"The little boy in the sweats and T-shirt—"

Eva rolls her eyes. "I've had him *forever*, mom. You never pay attention."

Mrs. Taylor studies me for the longest moment, during which I'm convinced the jig is up. Nevertheless, I continue to take shallow breaths, I continue to force myself not to blink, I continue to *wait*. And wait. And...just when I'm ready to burst Mrs. Taylor shrugs, reminds Eva about breakfast, and leaves the room.

"See?" Eva says once she's closed the door. "This is why I need to stop using SMN. I always feel like I'm getting caught."

I become animated again, shaking out my arms and legs. "Maybe if you just told your parents, explained to them what the program is and how you use it."

"That's ridiculous."

"You'd be surprised. Not all parents are stodgy Stone Agers."

Eva looks at me amusedly. "Have you told *your* parents about SuperMegaNet?"

"Well, no," I say. "But that's because I haven't had time."

"Mm-hm." Eva shakes her head. "Ernie, fat and dumb as he is, was right when he had us make that pact. But I don't want to do it anymore. You shouldn't, either."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Theo. You're very impressionable. People give you something or tell you to do something and you take or do it without question. Today it's New Eyes, tomorrow it's cigarettes."

"I'm *not* impressionable." Really, I'm not. I *wanted* to install SMN, I *wanted* to try the New Eyes—and not just because I was running with the pack at the time. Even though I only interact with three people on my buddy list, SuperMegaNet makes me feel connected. My New Eyes let me *see*.

Eva sighs, walks over to her desk. "I have to get ready for school. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Yeah," I say, following. "I guess this means we won't be talking much from now on."

"We live in the same town," Eva says. "I'm sure there are other ways to see each other besides the Internet."

Possibly. "Okay. I'll show you what to do—just don't do it until *after* I've uploaded back home."

"Duh, Theo."

I take Eva's mouse and start poking around the Start menu. The SuperMegaNet entry has no uninstall option. "Did you try going into the Control Panel and removing it from there?"

"Yeah. I tried killing it from the task manager, too, and it wouldn't die. I even went a step further. Watch this." Getting down on all fours, Eva crawls behind her desk, fiddles with something, crawls back out. She stands beside me with her hands on her hips. "There. See?"

"What did you do?" I ask, glancing at the computer, at the screen.

"I unplugged the computer."

"No, you didn't. It's still on."

"Exactly. I unplugged it, and it's still on. How is that possible?"

I narrow my eyes at Eva. "You're joking."

"I'm not. Check for yourself."

Not to be a jerk or anything, but I do—and she's right. The computer's unplugged.

"Do you have a screwdriver handy?" I call out.

"Yeah, hang on," Eva replies, and rummages through one of her drawers. She hands me a Phillips.

I take off the side panel, poke my head inside. Though highly unlikely, there should be a huge battery or something. Not so. This thing is chugging right along without any power.

I crawl back out from under the desk; I sit on my haunches with a bewildered look on my face. "I don't get it."

"This is another reason I don't like SuperMegaNet," Eva sighs. "You can't get rid of it."

# Imminent Gold

**@theo**

My alarm clock goes off just as I'm getting back from Eva's. Normally, I'd be waking up right about now, grabbing a shower, having breakfast, brushing my teeth and all that, but instead I go over to the bedroom door, make sure it's locked. Then I sit at my computer again, scroll through my SMN buddy list. I highlight Beta's name; I click "Visit."

Off I go, from body to bytes, from Zen bedroom to poolside paradise—wait. Not quite. Oh, I've uploaded onto Beta's server, all right, but the decor has been drastically altered. In fact, I'm standing on what appears to be the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*. Comely women in colorful miniskirt-uniforms abound. Beta, sporting a yellow shirt, too-tight black pants, and gogo boots, is seated in the captain's chair.

"Ensign Ivanovich!" he exclaims with a pleased look on his face. "Welcome aboard!"

I pay myself a cursory glance. My shirt is red. Yikes! I've watched enough *Star Trek* episodes to know what *that* means.

"What's on your mind, buddy?" Captain Beta asks.

"Real quick," I say, "because I know you're probably busy battling Romulans or Klingons or whatever—"

"Naw, we're just getting ready to watch some *South Park*." He points at the main view screen. Two of his officers are wrestling a couch into place in front of the command module. "You're welcome to join us."

"I've got school in half an hour," I tell him.

"That's too bad. What can I do for you?"

"Tell me how to uninstall SuperMegaNet."

Beta frowns, looks slightly betrayed. "Is this about my living in your bedroom?"

"No, no," I say. "My friend doesn't want to use the program anymore. She tried uninstalling from the Control Panel, she tried turning off her computer—she even unplugged the thing. Nothing happened. It was still running as if she'd done nothing."

"That would be your quantum technology at work."

"Meaning?"

Beta crosses his leg, William-Shatner-as-1960s-Captain-Kirk style. "You can't simply turn off or disconnect your neighbor, can you?"

"Well, no." Not unless they're on a respirator.

"That's the concept behind SMN. Ultimate collaboration, all the time, 24/7. The entire network is supposed to be like one giant chat room, only it's people's living rooms, bedrooms, offices, cubicles at work. Doesn't matter if you have a hundred miles between you and the person you're talking to. SMN means to make it synonymous with stepping from one room to another when you click that 'Visit' button. You can't simply banish your bedroom door when you don't want your parents to come barging in, and you can't turn off your buddy list just because you're not in the mood to chat."

Stupid Ernie. Did he even *read* the fine print before he made us all install this stupid program? "Can they do that? Forcing everyone to be...connected?"

"It's not a matter of 'can they?' They've *already* done it." Beta smiles, leans back in his chair. At the rear of the bridge, the turbolift opens; a yeoman enters carrying a trayful of drinks. "The thing about SuperMegaNet is, it was an internal hobby project at Taurus, two groups of programmers trying to win a bet. 'It can be done!' was the motto. This was never supposed to be a public product. But it leaked out, and so Taurus went with it to prevent a PR nightmare. And to take advantage of the user base for testing purposes. They're eventually going to release a dumbed-down version as the final gold code, something with your more standard VR features. Before then, all the 'bugs' have to be worked out. You know, all the interesting stuff like being able to upload and download yourself, storing yourself on different servers, et cetera."

"That...sucks," I say.

Beta puts his hand on my shoulder. Casually, he says, "Congratulations. You're a guinea pig."

"This is serious, Beta."

"I know it is. This whole develop-in-the-wild, bleeding-edge thing is one of the reasons I left Taurus. I don't agree with their philosophy of forcing togetherness on everyone as a way of covering up their mistake. And I don't intend to give up my virtual freedom once the crippled 1.0 version hits the Web."

Beta's still smiling, but I can tell he's serious. I guess I'd be too if I'd cheated death by going virtual.

After a moment I ask, "So, what are you supposed to do if you don't want SMN anymore?"

"You could, I suppose, beat the tar out of your computer with a baseball bat. Your webcam, too—preferably when there's no one downloading. Or you could wait a couple of years for your hardware to fail."

"There's no anti-SuperMegaNet program? No firewall setting to prevent uploads or downloads?"

"There you get into the quantum programming thing again. Part of the bet at Taurus was to come up with something that couldn't be hacked or blocked. A true *connection*." Beta laughs. "I think it was mostly the guys wanting to keep tabs on their girlfriends. Well, those who had girlfriends, anyway."

A mild cheer goes up as the *South Park* episode begins. The majority of Beta's bridge crew are making their way over to the couch as Cartman's face fills the

screen. I watch for a moment before facing Beta again.

"Hey, how come you didn't tell me about the downside to New Eyes?"

"What downside?"

"The optic nerve rot thing."

Beta waves his hand dismissively. "That's, like, five percent of people."

Oh, God. "But what if *I'm* in the five percent?"

"You're not."

"How do you know?"

Beta shrugs. "Your eyes would've melted out of their sockets by now."

"That's nice to know."

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Beta gets up from his chair, walks over to a console that's been grafted between the communications and library computer stations.

Curious, I follow him over.

"If it'll make you feel better..." Beta says, entering some sort of cryptic code via the keypad. Momentarily a bottle dropper materializes on a small platform above the console. He picks it up, tosses it to me. I barely catch it.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Old Eyes," Beta replies. "It restores your eyes to their natural default factory setting."

Great. More eye drops.

# Going Dark

**@theo**

I have problems with anxiety. That's why Mom has me see Dr. Chandelier every Friday. She's hoping that, through a series of high-priced idle conversations, he'll figure out what it is in my well-to-do life that has me so darned worried all the time. So far he seems to have his money on some sort of deep-seeded childhood memory. Me, I think my brain just likes to fret. I think it likes to make itself feel useful. If it doesn't have anything to worry about it makes stuff up. Like right now: I'm sitting here in Chandelier's office and waiting for him to arrive so that our session can begin; I'm surrounded by leather and mahogany and the faint smell of cigar smoke settling between the quiet ticks of this giant antique-looking grandfather clock that's supposed to be steady, soothing. I feel perfectly fine, I can see perfectly fine—yet I'm worried that at any moment the too-good-to-be true nanobots swimming in my eyes will suddenly malfunction, leaving me blind. Or worse.

Wednesday morning, I'd gotten back from Beta's *Enterprise* replica and, despite my newfound 20/20 vision, had found myself preoccupied with the notion of discovery, the possibility that if Mom realized I had New Eyes she'd find out that I'd gotten them from a stranger—and that the stranger had downloaded into my bedroom via a program that was going to keep me connected to the Internet whether or not I wanted to be. On the way out the door I'd hurriedly knocked the lenses out of my glasses. I'd then spent the entire car ride to school staring out the passenger window, sure, so absolutely *sure* that Mom was going to catch on, ask me what had happened to my lenses, ask me why I didn't need them anymore. Somehow she'd ended up not noticing, which had made me feel slightly more confident—until Ernie had caught me at my locker and asked me point-blank where my "bottle-ends" were. I'd told him the lenses had fallen out when I'd accidentally dropped my glasses on the sidewalk; he'd shrugged, called me a klutz, and asked to borrow a dollar; I'd ignored him and gone on to first period. Again, my confidence had welled slightly. But during roll call it had occurred to me that the accident explanation was only going to be good for a few days, at which point people were sure to start asking why the heck I hadn't stopped by LensCrafters.

By lunch my self-doubt had complete control. I'd decided to hole myself up in the library. I don't feel too bad about pulling a disappearing act, though, because on the way into the library, I'd peeked across the quad and spotted Ernie sitting alone at our table. I may have been ditching him—but Jan had evidently ditched him *first*. That's how it's been for the rest of this week. Ernie, Eva, Jan, and myself:

apart.

I squirm in my chair. Chandelier's office enfolds me. All the leather and mahogany and faint cigar smoke is suspiciously comforting. I slip my hand into my pants pocket; I press the bottle of Old Eyes into my palm. I'm seriously thinking of restoring my defaults. The alternative is too risky. It's already bad enough that I'm using SuperMegaNet behind my parents' backs, and it doesn't help that I've let Beta take over my bedroom.

Chandelier breezes into the office, closing the door behind him and seating himself across from me in his usual armchair.

"How was your week?" he asks, removing his wedding ring. There's a small table beside his chair; he sets the ring down, then picks up a small portrait of his wife, gazes at it, frowning, sighing, frowning some more.

"Okay," I say. I wonder if this is anything like a fortune-teller asking me my name—if he's good at what he does, shouldn't he already know? Shouldn't he be able to tell from the bags under my eyes, the way I'm constantly nibbling on my lip that I've got major weight on my shoulders?

"I see your glasses are missing their lenses," he says in an off-hand way.

Already my pulse is racing. "No, I...I got contacts. I...I'm just not used to, er, not wearing my glasses, you know?"

"Maybe you feel exposed without them? Vulnerable?"

"No...not really."

Chandelier chuckles wistfully. He's still looking at his wife's picture. "That's good. One less thing for us to have to work out. Any other news?"

I think back, grasping for something he'll want to hear. Something cliche. "I made a girl cry," I say.

Presto. His interest is piqued.

"Girl, you say?" he asks, setting down the portrait and looking at me.

"Yeah."

"Well, do tell! What's her name?"

"Eva."

"Ah. Eva." He leans forward in his chair, smiles. "Cute little thing?"

"I guess."

"Bright eyes? Sweet smile?"

More like bug eyes and, as of late, broken smile. "Sure."

"Mm-hm. Always having to politely remove your hands from her darling little bottom?"

Um, what?

Chandelier leans forward even further. "I don't tell this to all my young male clients, but between you and me—and *only* between you and me, because I know you're a sensible, responsible young man—you know what's good for two-thirds of your everyday worries and anxieties?"

I shrug my shoulders, shake my head.

"Regular interaction with the Fairer Sex."

Here we go...

"You're in high school now, right?"

I nod.

"No doubt they've taught you the difference between a condom and a water balloon?"

I nod again, this time blushing.

"Superb. That's the first step of many. You're forging new relationships, exploring new territory, and, yes, engaging in certain specific kinds of experimentation. The beauty of it? No wedding ring. Why, you can get away with things during your adolescent years that you'd never *ever* be forgiven for during adulthood. Now, I'm by no means advocating casual physical intimacy outside of a monogamous relationship, but stick with this girl, this *Eve*, see where she'll let you go—I'll let you take that however you like, since you *are* a responsible young man—and chances are you'll find yourself far more interested in her various aspects than in your silly little worries." Chandelier leans back again, clasping his hands and looking satisfied. "In a mutually monogamous relationship, of course."

You know...you'd think I'd be surprised, outraged, even, that my head doctor is recommending me and Eva explore the therapeutic effects of promiscuity—but I'm not. My high school guidance counselor chain smokes in her office and says "blowjobs" in front of students. She revels in the stereotype that all teenagers are delinquents who don't give a damn. Consequently, she doesn't give a damn. Dr. Freud, on the other hand, *does* give a damn because it bothers him that his clients' problems aren't so easily categorized. He'd rather I become sexually active years ahead of my time and therefore slip into a well-documented dysfunction—it'd be easier for him to treat that than the generalized worries I'm throwing at him now.

"Actually," I say, "it's not going too well between me and Eva. I sort of upset her, and now she's not talking to me or my friends."

"Oh? Tell me about that."

I explain the situation, outlining how I basically screwed Jan and Eva over. Naturally, I replace Jan with myself—and I make sure to leave out any mention of my plush mini-devil Theo doll. When I'm finished, Chandelier sighs, pays his wife's portrait another glance. He looks tired.

"Welcome to the Paradigm of the Sexes," he says. "The Great Joke, the never-ending struggle between male and female, see? We need it, women have it, and they'd rather lose a mammary than give it away for anything less than two kids, a house in the suburbs, two-car garage, joint bank account."

Too much information. Way too much. I squirm in my chair, unsure of what to do or say. I want to politely excuse myself, but my hour isn't up. Or maybe it's Chandelier's hour that isn't up. Either way, I've reached a conclusion regarding doctors: they need more help than do their patients. I may need CBT, a highly-specialized diet, after-school Yoga and calisthenics with Mom, bath-time aromatherapy, and chamomile tea before bed, but I still think I'm better off than the guy sitting across from me. At the very least, I'm better off than Thrill-Kill.

Freud eventually stirs in his chair, scribbles something on his clipboard, hands me a piece of paper. "I want you to start keeping a blog. Here are some links to get

you started. Blogger, Facebook, WordPress—it's all the same. I want you to post in your blog once a week. It can be about anything: school, friends, family, computers—your mother tells me you're into computers?"

"I design Web sites," I say.

"Fantastic. Tell people what that's like. Invite them to comment by posing a question of some sort at the end. Bring the URL for your new blog to our next session. Okay?"

I nod and look at the clock on the wall as Chandelier closes his eyes, settles deeply in his chair, and asks me to relate my earliest childhood memory.

* * *

It's later than usual (half past nine) when I walk into my room and set down my gym bag, take off my backpack. It's been a long day at the end of a long week. A sudden, unexpected dinner date with Mr. Megalomoto at P.F. Chang's only prolonged the suffering. He likes to do that, by the way: swing by the gym and insist on chauffeuring Mom and me to dinner. Really, he's only after an excuse to ogle Mom in her sports bra and compression shorts. This can be a good thing, though, as it usually means I get ignored. Mr. Megalomoto is too busy ogling, my mom is too busy pretending not to notice, and all the while I'm keeping my head down, I'm working through my Buddha's Feast with nary a peep.

I'm tired enough to actually get to sleep on time tonight. I grab a shower, return to my bedroom, spread my sleeping bag out on the floor. I lay there for a while staring at the ceiling, Beta's bottle of Old Eyes clutched in my hand. I think to myself that the adult world is more dependent on make-believe than its inhabitants would care to admit. Dr. Chandelier makes believe that I'm five years older and in desperate need of carnal knowledge; Mom pretends she's not an object in the eyes of her husband's boss; Dad pretends he doesn't care; I try to convince myself there's a chance in hell Eva will notice me if I become less of a geek (do you suppose that's an early warning sign of impending adulthood?).

I hold up the Old Eyes. There's just enough light from the front LEDs of my computer that I can read the instructions. I place the drops in my eyes and settle in for the night. Just as I start to wonder if I'm going to fall asleep, I suddenly jolt awake, realize I've been out for at least a couple of hours—

—there's someone kneeling beside me.

"Wake up, Theo."

It's dark, and my eyes have crusted over, so I can't make out who it is at first, though there's evidence of soft bulk, a beanie, the sound of an annoying coo.

Ernie.

"Wake up," he says again, and jokingly tickles my nipples through my T-shirt.

I swat his hands away, sitting upright in my sleeping bag and trying to open my eyes.

I can't.

"Hey," Ernie hisses. "My grandparents locked our fridge again. Can I grab a

midnight snack from yours?"

"I thought Becky was your supplier," I say, offhandedly. I'm starting to freak out. It's probably not the best thing to do, but I press my fingers against my eyelids and force them open. My vision is swimming with little squiggly flecks. I can make out the details of my room for a moment before everything goes black.

Ernie's oblivious. "She's being a bitch lately. Says I'm just with her for her snacks. Personally I think she's letting her fat make her paranoid—"

"Get out," I snap, stumbling to my feet.

"But—"

"Go home!"

It's quiet. Then:

"If this is about the nipples thing, I was just playing around."

"Ernie, leave. Now."

He snorts, tells me off under his breath. I hear him go over to my desk, click the mouse. In a moment he's gone, and I'm alone. I don't know why I need to be, but I do. Maybe I can deny my worst fears if there's no one in the room with me to confirm them. Oh, but the darkness *is* real.

It surrounds me.

# Of Cabaret Crackers and Hamster Eyes

**@ernie**

In case you haven't noticed, I have a slight weight problem. No, it's true. I've come to terms with it, I accept it—so why can't my grandparents do the same? Why do they have to meddle? Why do they insist on trying to fit me into their own ridiculous set of standards? And after they've been doing so well these past few days, keeping off my back, living their own boring lives and letting me live mine. We had an unspoken truce—then we have dinner last night, and everything goes to hell just because I bust my shirt while reaching for the mashed potatoes. Just because, in said busting process, one of my shirt buttons happens to fly across the table and hit my gramps in the forehead.

(Don't laugh. I'm sure at *some* point in your life you've busted a seam or lost a button at the dinner table while reaching for your second or third helping. It can happen to anyone!)

Anyway, my grandparents both set their forks down and give me the third degree in their quiet, restrained old-farts way. Gramps asks me if I think I've had a little too much to eat; Grams asks if I've taken a look at the gym brochure she left outside my bedroom door the other day; both give me dirty looks when I say, "Oh, my *God*. I'm *fine*. You're both overreacting. Now, what's for dessert?"

Grams quietly gets up from the table, goes into the kitchen, comes back a few minutes later with a plate of Cabaret crackers. *Cabaret crackers!* Have you ever had those? You need a whole box just to get the *impression* of flavor!

Naturally, I push the crackers aside and get up, heading for the kitchen. We bought a box of chocolate chip ice cream on Wednesday, and I plan on making a sizable dent in it.

"Don't bother," Grams says, in the coldest, quietest tone you ever heard. "I've put the lock back on the fridge."

Can you believe that? She's put the lock back on already! It's only been off since Tuesday! What the hell? Fugging tease!

I yell at her that it's unfair, but she just takes a sip of water, tells me I haven't been excused from the table yet.

I sit back down. The three Cabarets are chilling there on their plate and looking as unappetizing as cardboard coasters. I try one, just to humor my grandparents, and let me tell you, they're worse than they look. They're so bad my eyes tear up. Throwing my head back, I scream, "It's like biting into nothingness!" I down the rest of the crackers, each one dissolving almost as soon as it hits my tongue.

"*Nothingness!*" I wail.

In spite of my pain, my grandparents ignore me and start to clear the table. Gramps tells me to finish my homework, take my shower—so I think fine, I'll just hit up Becky later and we'll share a bag of Doritos or half a pound cake or whatever. Turns out *she's* in on it too. Either that, or she's got the *worst* timing ever. When I message her with my suggestion, she smiles at me, scrunches up her freckled nose, and says, "I'm glad you messaged me, Ernie. I've decided that I'm going on a diet with you."

"Wait, I'm not on a diet," I say—and then it hits me: she wants *me* to go on a diet with *her*.

You've *got* to be kidding me.

I sit there at my desk for a while, alone in my bedroom, isolated from everything and everyone I hold dear. No fridge, no food, no sugar to level my nerves—and Becky going on and on about how she thinks she can drop fifty pounds so that she can fit into some stupid pair of jeans. Eventually I just close her SMN window (though I can still hear her voice) and bring up Theo's. Normally, he wouldn't be my first choice as far as snacks are concerned, but Eva's never at her computer anymore, and Jan's too poor to afford any *good* treats. Lucky me, though: Theo's in one of his moods, worried about beauty sleep or something.

That was yesterday night. Now it's Saturday morning, five or six hours away from dawn, and I haven't had my usual midnight snack. Hunger is a terrible thing. Psychological hunger is even worse. I'm all twitchy and hyper; I can't think, I can't game, I can't function. Goddamned grandparents.

I'm going to message Becky back. Maybe she'll let me help her clear out her fridge to make space for all the carrots and broccoli she's going to be starving herself on. I start to bring up her SMN window, but freeze in mid-click when something rustles behind me. I glance over my shoulder—and spot Theo, fully dressed, stumbling over a pile of my clothes. He goes down hard, landing face-first on the floor, arms and legs splayed every which way.

Hmf.

"Have you come to apologize?" I ask, swiveling around in my chair, folding my arms—and nearly messing myself when Theo rolls onto all fours, looks in my direction.

He's got *black* eyes.

Like, his pupils have enlarged and swallowed up his irises, which have, in turn, swallowed up his eye whites.

"Holy crap," I breathe, jumping out of my chair. "Nice, er, contact lenses."

"What do you mean?" he asks, whimpering, carefully getting to his feet and reaching out with his arms like he's blind.

"Your eyes," I say. "They're all black...like a hamster's."

Theo starts feeling his face with his hands. "Oh, no! What else?"

"I don't know. Look in the mirror."

"Damn it, Ernie! Don't you think I would if I could?"

Oh, wow. He *is* blind.

And he's just cussed for the second or third time in his whole life.

I step forward a little, wave my hand in front of his face. "Really? You can't see at all?"

"Just...shapes. Lights, sometimes."

"Does it hurt?"

He frowns, swallows. "No. See, I...I got New Eyes—"

"New Eyes? *You* got New Eyes?"

"Shut up and let me finish!"

I can't believe Theo—little, adorable, innocent, straight-edge, New Age, vegetarian Theo—got New Eyes!

"I got some Old Eyes to remove them," he continues, "because I didn't tell my parents about the New ones, and I was worried about what they'd say when they found out. But instead of giving me back my old vision, the Old Eyes made me go blind." He settles back down onto the floor, sitting cross-legged. He puts his head in his hands and starts crying. "What am I going to *do*, Ernie?"

"Well," I say, trying to sound like I'm putting a helpful suggestion into words when really I've got absolutely nothing. "It's Saturday morning. You, um, can probably sleep in a while. Maybe the effects will wear off."

"And if they don't? If I'm stuck like this for good?"

"Then..." I trail off. What the heck am I supposed to say? I don't know squat about New Eyes except that those old TV commercials had some seriously stacked babes in them. What can I possibly tell Theo that will make him feel the least bit better about going blind?

I look at him, and he's crying and shaking all over. I guess I'm kind of flattered that he came to me for help, but now that he's here I don't know what to do. I've never seen this before in real life. On TV, yes, but never like *this*. I want to run from the room and hide in a closet or something; I want to cover my ears and hum really loud—I want to pretend I don't know that my friend is in deep trouble and I haven't a clue how to help him.

Eventually I say, "You should go wake up your parents, get to a hospital or something."

Theo looks up, looks totally spooked. "I can't tell my parents. No way."

"Why not?"

"Are you kidding? They trust me too much."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Come on, how many twelve-year-olds do you know who have their own business?" Theo shakes his head. "Everything in the world works because of constant pressure between forces that balance themselves out. My world exists because I'm careful about everything I do. I plan ahead, I follow through on promises. My parents let me make my own money, they give me total privacy because they trust me not to do stupid things with their trust. No hacking into government sites, no gambling, no porn or sex meet-ups or cybering. No giving in to those opposing pressures. If they find out I've lost my sight because of something I got off the *Internet*, that'll be it. Everything will fall apart. They'll treat

me no better than your average brat."

My sarcasm reflex goes off without warning. "You say that like you're above all the rest of us poor slobs."

"I didn't mean it like *that*. I just meant I actually *do* something with myself after school—wait, no, I don't mean it like that, either—damn it, Ernie, you know what I mean! I can't let my parents know what's happened because it means I'll get in trouble!"

"Um, they're kind of *going* to find out," I say, "when you start running into walls and falling down stairs."

"I know." Theo starts nibbling on his lower lip. He looks angry all of the sudden. "This is all Beta's fault."

"Beta? You mean the Asian dude living in your bedroom?"

Theo nods in my general direction. "Yeah. He's the one who gave me the New Eyes in the first place."

"I hate to be the one to remind you of this, but *you* were the one who actually used them."

"I *know*," Theo says, looking like he's about to start crying again.

"Why'd you want New Eyes, anyway?" I ask, hoping to catch him before he does.

"Um...no reason."

"Oh, so you woke up one morning and thought to yourself, 'Eff it, I'm bored. I'm going to mess around with some eye drops?'"

Theo sighs. "This is going to sound stupid, but...I wanted Eva to notice me. I thought...I thought without my dumb ol' glasses getting in the way she might stop paying so much attention to Jan and start paying more attention to me."

I should've known. In retrospect it's perfectly obvious why Theo would *ever* do something that might unsettle his perfectly meticulous little life: he has a thing for Eva.

"Oh, *that*," I say nonchalantly.

Theo stops crying. He blinks at me, sightless. "You don't sound surprised."

"Well, it's not like I didn't know."

"Really? You knew?"

Poor naïve Theo. It's been written all over him since that first day in Thrill-Kill's office. The way he looked at Eva, hung on her every word—if there'd been any chance of him not getting expelled, he *so* would've dropped his pants and taken her right there on the desk. Repeatedly. "I'm very perceptive despite my fatness. You like ponytails, she's got one. You like small and sporty, she's both. Sure, she's got the bug eyes, but that's nothing a mask or paper bag won't take care of."

Theo narrows his hamster eyes.

"Hey," I say, spreading my hands, "I'm not the one you have to worry about. Bug Eyes is totally not my type from the neck up. Or down. No, it's Jan you should be worrying about."

"But Jan doesn't like her—"

"Doesn't matter! *She* likes *him*. Eva looks at him like you look at her."

I think I'm getting through to him. For a sec something like recognition flashes across his face—but then he just shakes his head. "Why are we even having this conversation? I'm *blind*."

"You never know," I tell him. "Some chicks dig blind guys, or guys without legs, or guys—"

"Ernie, stop. You're not making me feel any better."

"Sorry." Back to the awkwardness.

The two of us are quiet for a while. I think we're trying *feel* the right way about what's happened, if that makes any sense. I know my tangent on Eva is proof that I'm in some kind of shock. It's a weird feeling, not knowing how you're feeling.

After a while Theo gets to his feet, wobbles, reaches out with his arms. "Where's your computer?"

"Over here," I say, pointing (my gesture is, of course, completely useless under the circumstances). "Why?"

"I'm going home. Send me home."

"What are you going to do?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I shrug. I know I should probably say something else to make him feel better, or maybe I should offer to go back to his place with him, offer my support—but, honestly, I just want him out and on his way. I know that sounds messed up, but I've never had to watch someone suffer before.

There's a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I don't like it.

## A Way Out of the Darkness

**@theo**

I didn't mean to freak Ernie out. Usually he's so nonchalant about everything I guess I thought he'd have some whimsical angle about me losing my eyesight. I thought he'd make light of my situation so that I'd end up feeling almost silly about the whole thing, so that I could relax enough to go wake my parents and tell them what's happened. Instead I just feel worse. Ernie had sounded so...scared. Like when you're horsing around with your friends at the mall and one of you falls down the stairs and starts bleeding all over the floor in front of GameStop. Everyone in your group takes off running because they don't want to have to stay and listen to the crying. They don't want to get in trouble. And even though you know better, you leave too, because you'd much rather hear the story later than try to stop the bleeding yourself, possibly bungle it so that your friend has to get his leg amputated at the hospital afterward. You know what I mean, right? That's how I feel right now.

Except I can't run away from myself.

And I have absolutely no clue how to get rid of the darkness surrounding me.

They say your sense of hearing becomes sharper when you're blind. It's true. I can hear everything now, every rustle, every whisper, the muffled clicks of my computer's hard drive, the creak of my office chair beneath me. These are things I've heard before but never noticed. Their meaning now is momentous.

I sit still for a few minutes, listening closely for Mini-Theo. He's probably hiding from me because he knows he's gotten me in big trouble. After all, he was the one who insisted I use the New Eyes in the first place. Oh, why did I listen to him? He's not even real...is he? I mean, did Jan really see him that day I brought him to school with me, or was it me imagining that he did—

—I'm grasping at tangents. I'm trying not to notice that my hands are trembling and my heart is racing. I'm burning up and yet not sweating. This is ridiculous. Why can't I simply get up and go tell my parents? I could let it all out, then. I could just cry and sob while they get dressed, find their keys, take me out to the car; I could fall asleep in the backseat as they whisper reassuringly that everything is going to be all right. On waking I'd be in good hands, surrounded by doctors, specialists, people to make me feel better.

"But what about what happens after?" Mini-Theo asks softly.

I swivel in my seat, frown in the direction of his voice. "There you are. Traitor."

"Me? A traitor? Hardly!"

"This whole thing was your idea."

"I was just trying to get you to think and act more proactively. And if you want to get technical, yes, it was my suggestion to try the New Eyes—and it would've worked, too, if you hadn't soiled your pants a whole two days later. The Old Eyes were *your* doing, not mine. But let's not get off task here. My original question is still valid: what happens after?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie.

"What happens when—*if*—the doctors fix your eyes and you've recovered well enough for your parents to ask you to explain yourself—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"They'll pity you, that's what. They'll use your weakness to dig up all the dirt on you, expose all the cracks and crevices of your façade. They'll treat you like the twelve-year-old you really are."

I want to swat at him, but I can't see exactly where he is. And besides, he's right. I hate being the needy kid, the fragile only child who's afraid of everything and everyone. Blowing my cover story now would be suicide. But how do I keep this a secret? And, besides the blindness thing, how can I maintain the illusion that my noggin is improving, that my sessions with Chandelier are working, that I'm once again the carefree child I was before discovering worry?

Beta's got to know something. I mean, he's figured out how to store his entire *self* on a server. Maybe there's a chance he also knows how to bring sight to the blind.

My instinct is to reach for the mouse—duh, I can't see. I start hitting the tab key, trying to visualize in my head what the layout of my desktop is. It's wishful thinking, though. There's no way to know which buttons are active in which windows. Getting to Ernie's had been easy the last time because his window had already been active from when he'd downloaded into *my* room. Now it's all chance.

*Tab.*

"Beta?"

No answer.

*Tab.*

"Beta?"

Fumbling. A ticked off voice (not Beta's) asking, "What the hell?"

Good! At least I know I'm tabbing through my SMN buddy list (and not just through the icons on my desktop)!

*Tab.*

"Beta?"

Snoring, followed by a quick cough, the rustle of a blanket, Summer's sleepy voice— "Theo? Are you still awake—have you kicked Beta out yet?"

(Summer snores!)

*Tab.*

I'm about to call out Beta's name again when suddenly I feel the keyboard slipping out from beneath my hands.

"For Christ's sake," Mini-Theo grunts. "Let me do it."

I hear him moving the mouse and pounding a few keys with his fists. It must be tedious, considering his diminutive size, but worth the wait, as in a moment I hear Beta's voice coming through my speakers:

"Yo, little dude, what's—holy crap."

Holy crap is right. "Oh, Beta, thank goodness! I need your help. I...I think my Old Eyes messed up my original eyes."

"Yeah, I can see that."

I can hear it in his voice: He's never seen this before. He's never talked to someone in the Five Percent Side-Effects Club, of which I'm a member.

It takes all my willpower not to burst into tears as I ask, "Can you do anything for me?"

Beta sighs. "Shoot, no way. I'm just a programmer—nanotech is programming *and* biology *and*, in your case, ophthalmology."

"Oh." Well, that settles it. Dark glasses and a cane for me—

"But I might know someone who can help you."

My hopes do a cautious about turn. "Yeah?"

"I have to warn you, though, he's an old dude. He gets grumpy when people wake him up in the middle of the night."

"I'll take that chance," I say.

## doctor_cracker

**@theo**

There are voices surrounding me. I can't see a thing, but it sounds like I'm in a moderately-sized room full of people. A lobby or parlor, maybe. Beta's got his hands on my shoulders and is guiding me into a chair.

"Where are we?" I ask, feeling for the arm rests, easing myself in. "Some kind of free clinic?"

"It's a secure proxy," Beta answers. "doctor_cracker is a little OCD with his privacy."

doctor_cracker? "We're going to see someone named *doctor_cracker*?"

"Chill. That's just his screen name. Speaking of which, you should know it's screen names only while we're here. Okay, l33t_master?"

"Okay."

"All right. Wait here. I'm going to get us in the queue."

As if I'm in any position to be wandering around by myself.

I lean back in my chair, cross my fingers and pray that Beta remembers to come back. It doesn't occur to me that someone might notice my condition and ask questions until I hear a soft, low whistle coming from beside me.

"You a Wes Borland fan?" asks a male voice.

I don't know who that is. "Why do you say that?"

"The contacts. You look like Wes Borland from Limp Bizkit."

"They're not contacts," I reply, immediately regretting my honesty, but unable to wrangle my tongue before the words are out. "I...I had a little accident. New Eyes."

"Oh." The guy beside me goes quiet for a moment. "Damn. Well, look on the bright side. It could be worse."

"How's that?" How could it *possibly* be worse?

"I had a friend who tried Big Dong. Got himself all big and mighty, went to try it out on his girlfriend and the darned thing fell off. Turns out that particular batch of Big Dong had been infected with a computer virus."

Wow. That's truly horrific. I'll have to remember that the next time I run into trouble.

Momentarily, Beta returns.

"Yo, l33t. I got the doc out of bed. Let's go."

I stand. Beta leads me several steps in one direction, stops me, does something with his free hand. I hear a mouse click—and off we go, out of the proxy, into

doctor_cracker's domicile. I can't tell you what the place looks like, but I *can* tell you what it smells like: pizza boxes. Leftover pizza boxes.

"What's up, cracker?" Beta says. He pats me on the back. "This is my friend, l33t_master."

doctor_cracker sighs, snorts grumpily. Without returning Beta's greeting he asks me, "You've been playing with corrective eye drops, haven't you?"

I nod.

"Yeah. Um, okay. Thanks but no thanks, Beta. You and your friend can show yourselves out—"

"Don't be like that, doc," Beta interrupts. "We're supposed to be old pals, remember?"

"Friends or not, this is messy business, this nanotech stuff."

"Which is why l33t needs your help. I mean, he can't very well waltz over to the ER, can he? Not unless he wants his parents fined, his Internet connection cut."

"And I could go to jail. You could be deleted. Heck, you *especially* should know the risks involved in associating with a nano-junkie."

"He's not a junkie, he just had a bad reaction. And it's a free country. I'm not out to hurt anyone or hack any government servers."

doctor_cracker is starting to get worked up. He whispers loudly, "That's all fine and dandy for you, you've gone virtual. But I—" (I can practically hear him jabbing his finger in the direction of a nearby hallway or staircase.) "—still have a life to live and a family to take care of, thank you very much!"

"Do this for me and I'll get you the new Steely Dan album."

doctor_cracker pauses, then says, "You're bluffing."

"I'm not."

"No one's got that—not even Steely Dan's got that."

"I know one of the engineers. He got me the files. FLAC. None of that MP3 cheese."

doctor_cracker keeps quiet for a good long while. Then he sighs again, and I can hear him moving away. "All right. Bring him down to my workshop."

It's slow and precarious work, but Beta guides me across the room and down a flight of stairs. Here, it smells like spray cleaner and wood chips. I'm seated on a hard chair; I can hear another chair or stool being dragged towards me. Beta lets go. I swallow hard, considering that if he and the doc were to ditch me here, I'd be lost forever.

"Tilt your head back," doctor_cracker says, and lifts my chin. He flips a switch, and suddenly I can see vague shapes, a bright light—like a street lamp through a very thick fog. "Okay," he says after a moment. "You want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Good news," I tell him.

"Your internal eye structures are intact. The bad news is that your vitreous—the fluid filling your eyes—is all gunked up with dead nanobots. Probably terminated prematurely, before they could do a proper cleanup. Sort of like when you try to uninstall a crappy Windows program from your computer. You've got

registry keys and discarded files everywhere. In this case, the nanobots left themselves unpacked."

"Oh."

"Basically, you're not getting enough light to the backs of your eyes. Normally I'd give you some drops that would go in and flush out the excess bots, but I'm hesitant to do that since I don't have a decent medical history on you. I don't know if this is an allergic reaction kind of thing or if the drops you used were defective or what."

Beta clicks his tongue. "I'm disappointed, doc. All this equipment down here and you can't do *anything*?"

"You didn't let me finish," doctor_cracker says. "Now, l33t, it's not a permanent solution, as your eyes are still jacked up, and, penalty or no penalty for using illegal eye drops, you should be seen by an actual *doctor*...but it just so happens I'm a tinkerer. I can give you special contact lenses that'll beam the necessary light to the backs of your eyes."

"Bravo!" Beta cheers, clapping lightly. "You see, l33t? This is why I love the doc."

I want to tell him that no, I *don't* see—I'm flippin' blind! Instead, I smile and try not to hope for the best.

# The Smallest Cameras in the World

**@theo**

"I'm going to raid your fridge," Beta says.

"You're not actual," doctor_cracker says. "You can't eat."

"I can eat. I just can't *digest*."

"You should talk to my sister-in-law, then. She'd kill for a deal like that."

Beta laughs and, assuring me that he'll be right back, skedaddles away. I listen to him go. I want dearly for him to stay with me, but, more than that, I want to look like I'm taking this whole thing like a man—even though I don't understand why he and the good doctor are joking like it's Super Bowl Sunday. Maybe they're doing it for my benefit, maybe they're just as scared as I am and this is their way of keeping cool. Or maybe they see corrective eye drop mishaps like this all the time and there's really nothing to worry about. I hope.

I can hear doctor_cracker working beside me, tinkering. I let him be for a few minutes before I clear my throat and ask, "So, how is it you're qualified to be working on eyes?"

"Because," doctor_cracker replies, slowly and between bursts of concentration, "back in the day, I used to work with your good friend Beta over at Taurus Labs. They're the company behind the lovely little bit of SuperMegaNet technology which brought you here this morning."

I knew that.

"Beta was top dog back then, had his grubby little paws in a dozen different projects, one of which involved restoring sight to the blind. I was part of the ophthalmology team."

"Sounds kind of fancy for just a video chat program."

"Kiddo, SuperMegaNet is much more than video chat." doctor_cracker chuckles. "The chat client is one of many quantum and nanotech-based features developed off our various government contracts. You think your average store-bought PC can teleport *whole people* on just a Core 2 Duo and a gig or two of RAM?"

Now that he mentions it...no. "I figured the software had really good compression." Or something along those lines.

"Yeah, but how do you turn physical matter into light patterns that an ordinary three-megapixel webcam can scan and transmit over the Internet? How do you tell a computer where human DNA ends and background particulates—dust, pollen, dander—begin?"

Huh. “I guess you have a point.”

“Computers are dumb. They’re drones for processing input and output. When it comes to SMN, we need something that *thinks*, something that intuitively manages its resources in faster-than-real-time.” doctor_cracker shifts beside me, lifts my chin with his hand. “But I don’t need to tell you more. You’re in enough trouble already.”

I want to ask him what he means by that, but I get the feeling I’d be treading into delicate territory. So I shrug, trying not to flinch as he shines the light in my eyes again. It doesn’t hurt, it just feels weird keeping my eyes wide open while someone shines a bright light inside.

“I take it,” doctor_cracker says, “since you came here unsupervised you’re keeping your parents out of the loop?”

“I’d rather not worry them if I don’t have to,” I say.

“You get along with them?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why the secrecy?”

“They…they wouldn’t understand.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do,” I say. Which is a lie. I really don’t know exactly how my parents would react if I told them what’s happened. Mom and Dad are the most trusting people in the world. They’re not grossly naïve or anything; they simply trust me implicitly. They trust me to turn in my homework on time, they trust me to take a shower every day, to stick to my diet, to always tell the truth. They trust me to say no to drugs, to save my virginity for my wedding night. They truly believe I’m worthy and capable of minding my own affairs. But am I? Look at how I’ve handled this whole SuperMegaNet thing so far. I’ve kept secrets, told lies—I’ve eroded my own self-control. I had total reign over my thoughts and actions until SuperMegaNet—until Eva. She makes me want to do wild, strange things. She makes me have R-rated dreams in which I’m either running around and hacking her prospective boyfriends to bits, or I’m deflowering her in all the worst ways. She’s pitched me head-first into puberty. And she doesn’t even like me.

“Seems to me,” doctor_cracker says, “you’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“I don’t think I am,” I tell him. I go on to quote myself: “Everything in the world works because of constant pressure between forces that balance themselves out. My world exists because I’m careful about everything I do. I plan ahead, I follow through on promises—”

doctor_cracker snorts, cutting me off. “Kids these days. You all over-analyze entirely too much. Look at the ceiling.”

I look up. doctor_cracker pulls open the eyelids of my right eye and drops in the first contact lens, tells me to blink. He repeats the process for my left eye. I’ve never worn contacts before, so I don’t know if these are bigger or smaller than the norm. They feel big.

“You really should be seen by a doctor,” he says, and pulls my head forward slightly, slips what feels like a necklace over my head.

"I know," I murmur.

A sigh. "Okay, I'm switching the lenses on."

There's a sudden flash of light—it catches me off guard, causes me to flinch. However, the discomfort is only momentary as the room around me solidifies. I realize I'm in a basement. There's a row of shelves to my right, a work bench with a laptop on it; to my left, stacks of boxes beside a doorway, beyond which a flight of stairs leads upward. Above me, haloed by a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, is doctor_cracker. He's got thinning brown hair, wild and unkempt, a shaggy beard, and there are circles under his eyes, as if he doesn't sleep much.

He nods at me, steps back and gestures at the far end of the room, where he's got an eye chart hanging on the wall. "Read me the letters from the smallest line you can see clearly."

I squint. My vision's a little blurry. "P...E...G...F...D."

He has me cover my left eye. He turns to his laptop, punches a few keys. My right eye now focuses more clearly. "Better or worse?"

"Better," I say.

He hits a few more keys. "Better or worse?"

"Better."

And so we proceed, on down the line until both of my eyes are seeing crystal-clear. It's not unlike a visit to the optometrist.

We're just about wrapped up when Beta, Pringles can in hand, steps back into the room. I hadn't been able to see him before—I'd had no idea he's been sporting a ridiculous-looking Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts combo all this time.

"So, what's the deal, doc?" he asks. "Amputation? Castration? Lobotomy?"

doctor_cracker ignores him and fingers my new necklace (it's nothing special, just a piece of what looks like silver shaped into, appropriately, a tiny pair of eyeglasses). "This is your power source, l33t. Wireless. It's got a limited range, a few feet, give or take. It's the same kind of tech a person gets when they have, say, a modern pacemaker installed. Some people prefer bracelets, earrings, or novelty pins, but this is all I have on hand at the moment. Now, it takes an ordinary button cell. You should get about a week of juice before you have to change the battery, longer if you take the necklace off at night when you sleep. Keep an extra battery or two on you, just to be safe. Your lenses have a power-off memory of about five minutes, meaning you won't lose your settings if you replace the battery within that time. If you screw up, you'll have to have a tune-up to get your 20/20 back. I may or may not be available for another 2:00 AM appointment." He glares at Beta for a moment before looking back at me. "Clear? Good to go?"

I nod.

"All right, then." doctor_cracker ruffles his hair, rubs his face, starts out of the room. As he brushes past Beta, he reclaims the Pringles can and says, "I'll expect those Steely Dan files in my inbox by lunchtime."

"I'll get them to you by *breakfast*," Beta promises.

"Goodnight, bro."

"Don't you mean 'good morning?'"

"Whatever."

Beta waits until the doc is up the stairs before winking at me. "Like I said, he gets grumpy without his beauty sleep."

"He didn't seem that bad," I say, standing, blinking, rolling my eyes slightly. I have to consciously resist the urge to push my nonexistent glasses up the bridge of my nose.

I follow Beta up into doctor_cracker's cluttered living room. It's all rickety-looking dinner trays, empty pizza boxes, kids' schoolbooks and backpacks. We go over by the darkened window, where a battered PC sits on a patchwork desk—the family computer, I'm guessing. SuperMegaNet is up and ready to go. I step beside Beta and he uploads us back to the proxy, which is nothing like the plain, white waiting room I'd imagined. There are two-dozen tall, circular tables—no chairs—set throughout. On each table is a webcam and a simple keypad. Everything's sparse, minimalist, functional. The walls are made of glass; beyond is a panoramic angel's eye view of a bed of clouds. (In the back of my mind I'm wondering if it's an actual floating lobby or just a virtual chat room on a server.)

Beta gestures for me to follow him over to one of the webcams. "You know your IP address?"

"I do," I say.

"Cool. Punch it in here and press 'Enter' when you're ready. That's it."

"You're not coming back with me?"

"Naw. I've got some errands to run."

I nod. "Okay, then. See you when I see you, I guess."

Beta shrugs, looks away for a moment. "I'm really sorry things turned out the way they did, little dude."

"It's not your fault," I say. "You didn't know I was in the five percent."

"Still...I feel like I should've known better. I'll understand if you want me to leave."

There's my in, my chance to finally kick him out. I consider running with it. Summer would be pleased—but now that I think about it, I've grown accustomed to having a roommate. True, if it wasn't for Beta I'd never have tried New Eyes (or Old Eyes). But if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have gotten my sight back, either.

"Do you want to leave?" I ask him, pretending to be interested in a long-haired, guitar-carrying, troubadour-looking guy who's just appeared one table over.

Beta shrugs. "I don't know. I mean, you've got a great Internet connection. And it's nice playing *Super Smash Bros.* with someone who knows his special moves."

That's code for, "I want to stay friends with you." (See, guys can't really admit that they like each other in a friendly kind of way—but they *can* admit that there's no reason *not* to. If that's the case. And I think it is.)

"See you later, then," I say, and I step back, watch Beta key in his IP. He winks at me and hits 'Enter,' uploads (or downloads, depending on whether we're virtual or actual at the moment) away.

I linger in the proxy for a few minutes. People come and go quietly, minding

their own business. I watch them, trying to discern the differences between contact lenses and ordinary glasses. I wonder if I might go for the rest of my life with doctor_cracker's quick fix providing visuals—but no, that's not an option. It can't be. I'd be doing it for the wrong reason. I have to face my fears.

I have to tell my parents.

# Perceptive Flux from a Plush Doll's Perspective

**@theo**

It's less than an hour until dawn by the time I get home. I'm tired—I'm beyond tired. I'm in that fuzzy place where the mind refuses to shut off even though the brain is already out cold. I should probably go straight to bed, get a few hours' sleep before facing down my parents.

"Well, well, look at you! No more big ol' glasses!"

I look down. Mini-Theo is toddling over to where I'm standing. I give him a good, hard look. There's got to be some trick to his consciousness, some magic to his motion.

"And that bedroom hair!" he continues, stopping, smiling, wrapping his arms around himself and pretending he's making out with an invisible partner. "Your look is almost complete! All we need is a fish net tank top for you and the mass deflowering of Boca Linda's eligible girls can begin in earnest!"

"Never mind," I say, frowning, "that I've lost my natural eyesight—"

"While gaining at least a pound of pimpness!"

"—and that I have to wear special contacts until I can get my parents to take me to the doctor."

"You're too negative! With your new lenses you can see 20/20—*without the need for eyeglasses*. Say what you will, but that's *way* cool."

I shake my head. "Who *are* you?"

Mini-Theo stops making out with himself. He blinks up at me. "I'm you, dork. Part of you, anyway."

"Yeah, but are you real or imaginary?"

"I'm as real as you need me to be."

That's not an answer. "Meaning?"

Mini-Theo snorts, rolls his eyes. "Most people develop a voice in their head during adolescence. It's part of the cognitive development process. You developed a plush doll version of yourself instead. Big deal. You're not the first. It's called personification. The application of human-like attributes to an inanimate object."

"So, I *am* imagining you?"

"No, not at all. I totally exist. Now, whether I'm a walking, talking miniature or just a dirty sock you've personified is up for debate."

Also up for debate: whether I've gone insane or am just majorly sleep-deprived.

Mini-Theo raises his arms; a translucent layer of celestial imagery—galaxies, stars, planets—is superimposed against the backdrop of my bedroom; Dom F.

Scab's "Fear to Void" starts playing. "See, I exist in a state of perceptive flux. Someone else might walk into the room and see you talking to a dirty sock because that's what they *expect* to see, that's what their brain is wired to think is possible. To that person I can only exist as a dirty sock. To you it's entirely possible that I'm a walking, talking, super-sexy mini-me. Either of you would be correct in his assumption of my existence in a particular state. You're both seeing the same thing. You're just perceiving it differently."

"Then...I'm the only one who can see you as a doll?"

"I prefer the term *figure*. And to answer your question, it depends on who's looking and what their perceptive state is like."

I shake my head, dodge a brilliant sun as it whizzes past. "Real or not, why do I need a plush doll version of myself?"

Mini-Theo darts forward, kicks me ineffectively in the shin. The whirling pyrotechnics go *poof!* in time with the impact. "Stop thinking of me as a separate entity! I'm your ego, your libido, your competitive edge—I'm *you*. Us. I help get things done. I prioritize when to be a jerk and when not to be. I help us decide who to step on and who not to. When we're older, I'll make sure we get laid on our prom night."

"Thanks," I say, "but I think I can handle myself just fine without the likes of you."

Mini-Theo laughs so hard he nearly splits a seam.

"What's so funny?"

"Before I came along, all you did was go to school and come home. It was all homework or PHP coding with you. You go to your mom's gym everyday, but you've never been in a fight or arm-wrestled anyone or even walked around the house with your shirt off. You've never *lived*."

I sigh and say, "Before you came along I had eyes that worked, I had safety, security, stability—"

"*Boring.*"

"It's my life, to live how I want—"

"Fail! That's why your subconscious created me: because it was bored out of its ever-loving mind."

"—and anyway, there's something not right about believing in a little doll version of myself. People would think I'm nuts if they knew!"

"You shouldn't care what people think," Mini-Theo says. "Not if you sprout a plump, red zit on your nose, and not if you carry around your ego in plush *figure* form."

This is ridiculous. It's almost sunrise and I'm having an argument with a doll. I need to be in my bed *right now*. I crouch, grabbing Mini-Theo.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he squeals, flailing his little arms and legs like crazy.

"I'm putting you away," I tell him, and head for the closet. "Then I'm going to sleep for a couple of hours."

"Oh, I see how it is! Police state! Ignorance is bliss! Sweep the problem under

the carpet! Silence the little guy!"

I'm not listening as I toss him inside the closet. I slam the door, back up a step, bump into the TV. It turns on. That old *The Twilight Zone* episode, "The Passersby," is on. It's the scene where they show the wounded soldier's face. Out of reflex, I reach up to take off my glasses, like I usually do when there's something on that I don't like. Of course, I have no glasses. Just my fancy contacts, my crystal-clear, 20/20 vision that allows me to see the poor soldier's face in all its glory.

I *hate* this episode.

## The Effed Up Twinkie Episode

**Note:** "Jesse Gordon—the geek, that is" writes about himself in the third person in this episode. What a jerk.

(Aka, I'd been self-hosting my Web site at the time, said site had crashed, taking *SuperMegaNet* with it, and this episode was my tongue-in-cheek apology once things were up and running again.)

* * *

**@summer**

I'm getting ready for Saturday morning practice when Lily messages me on AIM:

**gracefulklutz:** Are you watching this?
**summer_girl:** Watching what?
**gracefulklutz:** The SuperMegaNet preempting thing!
**summer_girl:** What SuperMegaNet preempting thing?
**gracefulklutz:** Go look at your buddy list!
**summer_girl:** I'm kind of in the middle of doing my hair.
**gracefulklutz:** Go. Now.

I sigh and set down my hairbrush. I've been friends with Lily long enough to know that when she wants me to do something I've just got to do it. No buts.

I bring up my SMN window. Instead of my usual buddy list, though, I've got a column of identical thumbnail feeds displaying the inside of a gym. Ernie and Jan are there—and some random guy. Ernie's stuffed himself into a ridiculous-looking track suit; Jan's in a tank and sweats; the random guy—short, glasses, major five o'clock shadow, unkempt hair, vaguely familiar—has on a blue-green sweatshirt that's missing the hood string.

The sweatshirt-glasses guy hands Ernie a box of Twinkies. He points at a nearby weight bench.

Ernie cringes.

Jan sighs.

They approach the camera, the boys in front, the sweatshirt-glasses guy standing behind them and fiddling with a camcorder.

Ernie mutters something under his breath. It sounds like, "I can't believe you're making us do this, Gordon."

(Gordon—Jesse Gordon. So *that's* who the sweatshirt-glasses guy is.)

"It's no big deal," Jesse says.

"Don't you dare use the b-word around me!" Ernie screams. He clutches his belly, massages a hefty handful of fat through his track suit. "Of course it's a *big* deal! You disappear for over a month, no explanation. Then your site disappears. Again, no explanation. None of us knows if you've been hit by a car or if you were arrested because of a dressing room mishap or what. We sure as hell have no clue where to show up for work in the morning. And it's not like there's an unemployment office for out-of-work fiction characters. Theo had no choice but to do BSD Daemon mascot work. Jan here's been whoring himself out at all the sex story repositories. Eva...I don't know what she's doing. Probably working the *Twilight* fanfic circuit."

Sex story repositories? Mascot work? Oh, my God! How sad!

Jan blinks at Ernie, goes wide-eyed. "I'm *not* doing sex stories. Who told you I was doing sex stories?"

"It doesn't matter!" Ernie flails his arms above his head. "What matters is that Mr. 'Jesse Gordon—the geek, that is' left us high and dry! He left me to starvation, you with possible genital warts, Eva with a severe case of Bella envy!"

"Ernie, I have *not* been doing sex stories!"

Jesse waves his hand in the air. "Guys, calm down. I didn't *leave* you. I took a break."

"A break?" Ernie snorts. "From what? You blog once or twice a month!"

"Um, I also do a lot of other things, thank you very much."

Ernie wags the Twinkies box at Jesse. "You've never had a real job in your life!"

"Ernie—" Jan says, trying to cut in.

"Keep pulling cheap blog stunts like this and I'll be seeing you on the streets!"

Jan tugs at his sleeve, looks like he's trying to calm him down before he says something *really* stupid—but it's too late.

Jesse's mad.

Giving Ernie an imperial look, he says, "Do the Twinkie stunt or you're off the series."

Ernie narrows his eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

Jesse narrows his eyes. "Oh, yeah, I would."

Slowly, quietly, Jan steps into the background.

"Go," Jesse continues. "Find another blog if you think you can do better. But remember this: there are a *lot* of bloggers out there. And not all of them pay in honey buns."

Ernie blinks, swallows. "Fine, I'll do it. But only if it'll shut you up." He starts toward the weight bench (the camera follows). Under his breath: "Lucky for us you're not popular enough that anyone's actually reading this crap anyway."

"What was that?" asks Jesse.

"Oh, nothing," Ernie replies, turning and smiling innocently. "I was just saying

that this should definitely improve your readership."

Jan clears his throat. In perfect (yet very nearly unintelligible) English, he addresses the camera. "Um, excuse us, everyone. Sorry for the interruption, but due to certain stipulations in our contract, we're going to preempt your feeds for a few minutes—"

"*We're* not doing anything!" Ernie shouts, pushing Jan out of the way and framing himself somewhat-center. "This Jesse Gordon character—" He juts his thumb over his shoulder. "—is being a royal douchebag and making us pull this ridiculous stunt just because he went and created some lame ol' SuperMegaNet Facebook group that he can't get anyone interested in! So, he's going to exploit the fat kid in the hopes that it'll attract members! Because everyone knows fat kids *love* Twinkies. How *original*!"

Jan shoves Ernie aside. "Mr. Gordon would like to commemorate the Facebook group's achieving five non-family memberships with an impromptu stunt performed by Ernest Goodale and myself. Without further ado, I present to you the Twinkie bench press."

Jesse hits the record button on his camcorder. Jan lays on the bench. Ernie climbs above. There's a moment of hemming and hawing before Jan, cringing, braces his arms in the air. Ernie sits on Jan's hands. He has to lean sideways somewhat, but it works well enough that Jan can hold him suspended above his chest. He performs his first rep.

"Good," Jesse murmurs, chuckling. "Open the box, Ernie."

Ernie opens the Twinkies box.

"Now, eat."

I'm aghast. And yet I can't turn away. It's just one of those things, you know? Ernie sniffles, unwraps a Twinkie, takes it in as Jan trembles below, red-faced. In the background, Jesse's got his camcorder aimed squarely at the boys. He's giggling like a little schoolgirl, he's acting like he can't help himself—but he can. *He's* the writer, *he's* created this sadistic scene, and *he's* spurring it on for his own personal enjoyment.

Jan does another rep, this one not as certain as the first. Ernie wobbles, over-compensates, and gets a chunk of Twinkie stuck in his eye.

**gracefulklutz:** This is *so* sad.
**summer_girl:** Totally.
**gracefulklutz:** Have you heard anything about this SuperMegaNet Facebook group, or whatever it is?
**summer_girl:** Nope. You?
**gracefulklutz:** Nope.
**summer_girl:** Sad.
**gracefulklutz:** Yeah.

# We Interrupt This Blog for a Special Announcement from Theo Ivanovich

**@jan**

"Jan! Katka! Come into the bathroom and look at this!"

That's Dad shouting as if he's on the second floor of a townhouse. I pause the eighties bikini babe YouTube video I'm watching and glance tentatively toward the hallway. The first thought to cross my mind: he's spotted another gray hair, and he wants us to help him find any others so that he can pluck them out.

Mom leaves the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel, and crosses the living room. She gives me a silent "let's get this over with" expression. I follow her into the bathroom—and gasp when I see that there's a *tree* growing out of our toilet. Its branches are fanned out over the sink; the tallest ones graze the ceiling.

"*Můj bože!*" Mom exclaims, and slaps my shoulder. "Jan! I told you to use bleach when you clean the toilet!"

"No, no," says Dad. "This *has* to be from the seeds I found under the tank this morning."

I scrunch up my nose. "Seeds?"

"Yeah. Little round, black things. I thought they might be, er, droppings of some kind, so I flushed them."

Mom looks concerned, glances along the floor. "To think we might have a rodent problem!"

Dad rolls his eyes. "Well, *obviously* it's not rodents."

Unless watering rat droppings happens to be an undocumented method of growing trees in toilet bowls. Maybe it's the combination of human and rat feces that causes a chain reaction...

"What are those things there?" I ask, stepping toward the bowl and scrutinizing the tree, thinking I can't be seeing what I think I'm seeing. "The buds, they look like—"

"The answer to all our problems!" Dad shouts. He plucks a bud, pries it open, holds it out for me and Mom to see.

It's a hundred dollar bill.

Which means that this thing growing out of our toilet bowl is a money tree.

Mom whoops, puts one arm around me, the other around Dad, and holds us in a celebratory huddle. I'm ecstatic as I start to come up with a grandiose shopping list for when the tree is in full bloom—

"Jan. Hey, Jan. It's me, Theo. Wake up."

I blink—the bathroom vanishes as I come awake in my bed.

*Of course.*

"G'waytheo," I mumble, grasping my pillow and trying to wrap it around my head.

"Ernie," comes Theo's voice again, crystal-clear over his SuperMegaNet connection. "Wake up. Jan—"

"*Blech*...shiat," Ernie answers, groggily. "*Blagh*...bandersnatch. Whathafug?"

"Come on, guys. *Wake up*."

I groan, rolling out of bed and sitting hunched at my desk. Through the wall I can hear Mom and Dad's snoring. It rattles the family portrait, which is now hanging lopsided on the wall. Lucky them: they don't have friends who use SuperMegaNet.

I turn my computer monitor on, arrange Theo and Ernie's SMN windows side by side. Theo looks terrible, what with his hair all disheveled, and those huge bags under his eyes—but Ernie looks worse. He looks *trashed*, like someone took a baseball bat to his face. It looks like he has a black eye. No wonder he wears sunglasses during his morning classes.

"I'm awake," I yawn. "What do you want, Theo?"

"Yeah," adds Ernie. "What's the deal, Biclops? I see your eyes have cleared up. I told you they would." He pauses, looks off-screen. "Crud! I wet my bed—oh, wait, never mind. It's just soda."

Theo glares (at Ernie, I hope). "I'm getting off SuperMegaNet. For good."

"You're leaving SMN?" I ask.

"Yeah. I think Eva was headed in the right direction when she decided to quit. I'm not going to use it anymore, either."

Ernie looks hurt. "So what, it's down to me and the filthy Czech now? No offense, Czech."

"None taken, *leviathan*," I reply.

"I don't know what you're worried about, Ernie," Theo says. "You've got 213 friends. I'm sure at least a few of them wouldn't mind hanging with you in the Little Debbie chat room."

"Funny," Ernie grunts dejectedly. "Another fat kid joke. *Hilarious*."

Theo sighs. "Sorry. I'm irritable because I'm freaking out over the whole eyes thing—because I'm sick of SuperMegaNet and what it's done to me. Well, no more. I'm going to tell my parents what's happened so that they can ground me off this darned thing for a good long while."

"Wait," Ernie says, at last looking interested in the conversation. "What exactly are you going to tell your parents?"

"Everything."

"You're not thinking of mentioning SuperMegaNet, are you?"

"I am."

"What? No! You can't tell your parents!"

"Why not? What do you have to worry about? They're not *your* parents."

Ernie turns livid. "My parents are dead! Wal-Mart stampede! Or did the eye-rot

affect your memory, too?"

I start to ask what he means by "eye rot," but he cuts me off.

"We had a pact!" he screams, slamming his fist against his desktop. "We had a pact, and you're just going to dump all over it?"

"I *have* to, Ernie! You saw what happened to me!"

"Guys, what's going on? What happened—"

"That doesn't mean you have to ruin it for the rest of us! Tell your parents about *your* screw-up, but leave SuperMegaNet out of it!"

"I won't mention any of you," Theo promises.

"Doesn't matter!" Ernie shouts. "You know how parents are. Once one of them gets wind of something, they go blabbing to all the others the first chance they get. The supermarket, the salon, the Laundromat—breeding grounds for viral parenting! Before you know it *all* the adults will be checking their kids' computers. 'If it happened to smart little Theo it can happen to my lame brat, too!' And they won't stop there. They'll use SuperMegaNet as an excuse to take away our cell phones, our PlayStations, our porn collections! They'll take away every last freedom we have!"

"You're overreacting—"

"Am I?" Ernie leans forward, gives himself an extreme close-up. "My grandparents put a lock on our fridge—a *lock*!"

Theo shakes his head, reaches beside his computer monitor. "Ernie, I'm just going to go. This is getting out of hand."

Close-up to extreme close-up on Ernie: "Don't you dare tell your parents! I'll never speak to you again if you do! Don't you dare turn me off! Theo! Are you listening to me? If you turn me off I'll never forgive you! Never again! Theo—"

An abrupt click sounds through my speakers.

Theo's muted his audio. After a moment he gets up from his desk and leaves his room.

"That's it!" Ernie screams. "I'm coming over there right now! Theo! Goddamnit, answer me!"

"Ernie!" I wave at my webcam, lean over and enunciate into the microphone. "*What's going on? What happened to Theo? Why's he leaving?*"

Ernie's response: "Not now, closet jock!"

## How to Ruin Your Mom's Morning

**Interesting tidbit:** The first draft of this episode had a typo at the end resulting in Theo's heart-wrenching confession: "I'm blond, Mom."

* * *

**@theo**

I'm surprisingly calm as I make my way downstairs. No rivulets of sweat trickling down my face, no heart hammering in my chest, no clammy palms tingling in anticipation. Just the sounds of the morning, the smell of incense wafting from Mom's studio. I pause at the entrance, peering inside. She's doing acupuncture work on a pair of middle-aged men. When she sees me, she smiles and holds up her hand, gives me a done-in-five-minutes gesture.

I sit on the narrow guest sofa in the hall and wait, listening to her work. Every so often I hear a sizzling noise followed by a surprised gasp—followed by Mom's patient reminder to "keep relaxed."

Homeopathy is such a funny thing. People hate their doctors sticking needles in them, but they'll pay good money for Mom to do the same thing—with *flaming* needles. It seems to work, though. Clients come from all over, sometimes scheduling appointments months in advance. Part of me wonders if maybe there's some organic treatment, some special balm or tea that Mom can give me that'll flush the nanobots right out of my eyes. You never know.

The five minutes pass quickly enough, at which point Mom steps out into the hall. She sits beside me, wraps me in her arms. She kisses the top of my head. "Good morning, hon."

I clear my throat. "Good morning, Mom."

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah, I slept just fine." For that lone hour or two. "How come you didn't wake me at eight, like usual?"

"You're twelve now. And a freshman in high school. You don't need me hounding after you anymore." She smiles. "Besides, it's Saturday."

I nod, staring at the floor and fidgeting.

"What's wrong, hon?" she asks after a moment.

I say, "I got this, um, chat program for school. It was supposed to be for an assignment. I had to learn five things about my classmates, and they had to learn five things about me. But the program isn't just for chatting. It lets you upload and

download to and from other people's homes."

Mom nods as if she understands—but she doesn't. I can tell. She thinks I'm talking about uploading and downloading files.

"I...I met someone," I continue, still fidgeting, still staring at the floor. "His name's Beta. He's living on a laptop in my bedroom because his real body got deleted during a server crash. He gave me New Eyes to impress this girl, but I didn't want to keep them because I knew I'd get in trouble, so I asked him for Old Eyes to restore my original sight, but the Old Eyes didn't work right. Instead of getting rid of the nanobots from the New Eyes, they just clogged up my vitreous, and..." I trail off, realizing I'm probably not making any sense.

Mom's still smiling, still mostly oblivious, though it looks like she might be starting to understand that something's wrong. "Theo...I don't understand. What are you telling me?"

I barely get the words out before the first tears start trickling down my cheek: "I'm blind, Mom."

# The Allopathic Idiot

**@theo**

Despite Mom's being a certified homeopath, my family *does* have a standard, run-of-the-mill GP we go to for all things mundane. His name's Doctor Kim, apparently, and I have to read his name tag because I only ever visit his office for my yearly school checkup. Even then, Kim's staff handles the proceedings.

To that end, he looks surprised to see me—though he smiles and shakes my hand as he enters the examination room.

"Ah, my friends the vegetarians," he says. "Good afternoon."

My parents take turns shaking Kim's hand before sitting off to the side.

I pray to God I don't have to undress for some reason.

Mom clears her throat uncomfortably. She'd been crying a lot in the car on the way over. "Thanks for seeing us on such short notice, Doctor Kim."

"Not a problem." Kim steps in front of me, glances down at his clipboard. His thinning hair is slicked back over a smooth, shiny pate. "So, Theo, you're having a little, er, eye trouble?"

"I'm blind," I reply, my voice catching in my throat.

"Blind?" Kim looks at me, peers at my eyes. "Can you see anything? Colors? Shapes?"

"Well, right now I can see, but only because I have my contacts in."

Kim looks confused. He looks like he thinks *I* look confused.

I glance over at my parents.

Dad nods. "Go on. Show him."

I hate this. I feel like the dog-faced boy being asked to turn a trick. But it's necessary if I'm to be fixed up and sent on my merry way. I pop out the left lens, then the right. I blink in darkness afterward. I can't see Kim, of course, but I imagine he's doing the same thing I imagined my parents doing when I first showed them my hamster eyes: staring with his mouth wide open.

It's a good, long moment before I hear him clear his throat. He must be shining a pen light into my eyes, because I can see blurry halos dancing in the darkness. "How did this happen?"

"I used some Old Eyes drops," I say, slowly, reluctantly. "Well, not at first. I used New Eyes, then Old Eyes a few days later because I wanted to get rid of the New Eyes—"

"No, no, no, no..." Kim says, cutting me off. I hear him getting up, quickly walking over to the door, which he closes and locks. He goes to the other side of

the room; it sounds like he's fiddling with the window. "I'm sure it's something completely different. Irritation, conjunctivitis, maybe a little glaucoma..."

I pop my contacts back in. The darkness lingers. For a moment I think I've been too rough with the lenses—but then I realize that Kim has closed the shades, turned off the lights.

He motions for me and my parents to join him in a huddle near the sink. Holding his pen light above our heads, he whispers, "Look, before we go any further, you need to understand that this practice does not condone the use of nanotech..."

Dad starts to say something—

—Kim continues uninterrupted, locked into pre-programmed disclaimer mode. "...nor do we provide information on where said tech can be obtained—"

"*Doctor Kim*," Mom says, sternly, insistently. She grabs his head between her hands. "You're babbling."

Kim relaxes—a little. "I apologize for being so...*blunt*, but we can't be talking about this here. All of us could get into a lot of trouble."

"I don't understand," Dad says.

"Nanotech is very touchy business. Right up there with stem cells. I mean, that doping business at the Olympics, those politicians caught placing fabricated DNA at crime scenes...need I go on?"

"My son is *not* doping up, nor is he seeding any crime scenes with DNA or whatever. He's had an adverse reaction to some eye drops, and he needs your help."

Kim starts squirming. "I want to help. Really. But for liability reasons, I don't deal with nano, period. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

"But you haven't even *looked* at him yet!" Mom exclaims.

"It's not a question of diagnosis. I simply can't treat him."

Mom narrows her eyes. "Can't or *won't*?"

"Both," Kim says. "If we're talking complications from the use of New Eyes drops, then Theo's condition has likely been caused by a caliber of technology that's only available on the black market. What do you want me to do, dress in a trench coat and hat and go prowling around the seediest alleys in Chinatown?"

"If need be!" Mom growls, shifting her hands to Kim's neck—

Dad stops her. "Easy now, hon. Let's keep cool about this."

"And just how do you expect me to do that with our son blinded and this allopathic idiot refusing to lift a finger because he's more concerned over bureaucracy and red tape than he is with treating his patients?"

"Mrs. Ivanovich—Anya, if I lose my practice I can't treat anyone at all. Surely you'd agree that an 'allopathic,' as you call it, practice is better than no practice at all?"

My mom starts in again, something about having a backbone. I step back from the group, watching Kim quiver in his white coat, watching Mom seethe quietly while Dad holds her back. This isn't at all how I imagined things would turn out. Asian doctors are supposed to be smart, intuitive; they're supposed to have an herb or salve that can cure anything—they're supposed to know *kung fu*! (Don't even

harp on me for being racist—I'm half Asian, remember?) Here I thought Doctor Kim would be the answer to all my problems, my medicine man, my guiding light. Instead he's just a flake, a cardboard cutout representative of Western medicine's lackadaisical attitude towards nanotechnology.

"So, who am I supposed to turn to?" I ask. "Symantec? McAfee?"

Mom, Dad, and Kim stop arguing. They look at me. Kim uses the interruption as an out, wrestles free from Mom's grip, goes over to the window and opens the blinds. Then he heads for the door, opens it, flicks on the light.

Standing in the threshold, he says, "I wouldn't know, Theo. This is business for hackers, not an 'allopathic idiot,' as I've so thoughtfully been branded. Good day."

He turns and leaves.

## Pizza Box Reconciliation

**@theo**

No one says anything during the drive home. Dad's pretending he's focused on the road; Mom's quietly fuming in the passenger seat; I'm slumped in the back and wishing for things that can never be. Like time travel. But what's done is done. No sense crying over spilled milk—or spilled eye drops, as the case may be. The secret's out. My parents know about SuperMegaNet. They'll probably rush into my room first thing when we get home; Mom will start dismantling my computer while Dad hauls all my furniture out into the hallway. Next will be my music, manga, and video games—everything but a blanket and pillow. The blinds will be nailed shut, the light bulbs removed from their fixtures; I'll be instructed to remain in my room until Monday morning, at which time I'll be allowed a shower and a modest breakfast before I'm driven off to school in my parents' shiny new paddy wagon.

Dad turns onto Poinsettia. Admittedly, the pine and cypress canopy at the end of the cul-de-sac looks magnificent through my new lenses. We pull into our driveway, and Dad shuts off the car engine without saying a word.

Okay. I see. The silent treatment. Fair enough.

I start to get out of the car, but stumble as I miscalculate the distance between my sneaker and the concrete. Not because of the eyesight thing, mind you, but because I'm dead tired. It makes no difference to Mom, though. She does this Xena battle-cry thing and very nearly jumps through the passenger window so that she can steady me.

"Honey, careful!" she cries. "Let me help you."

"I'm fine, Mom," I insist, and shrug her off. I head up the walk, taking off my shoes and setting them aside before entering the house and sitting on the guest sofa. I await my fate.

Mom and Dad come in after a while. Mom sits beside me while Dad slowly paces back and forth with his hands in his pockets. Both of them look bewildered.

"What a jerk that Dr. Kim turned out to be," Mom says. "I can't believe we've been going to him all these years."

"Well, to be honest," Dad says, "we haven't been *going* to him. We've only used him to sign doctors' forms and to keep Theo's vaccination records up-to-date."

"He's a glorified stamp of approval. A checker of temperatures, a signer of forms—"

"He's also bound by certain laws, certain rules and regulations."

"Nuts to rules and regulations! This is my little Theo we're talking about!"

(I hate it when Mom refers to me like that!)

Dad clears his throat uncomfortably. "I'm hungry. You guys hungry? I'm going to fix us lunch." He goes into the kitchen.

"Are you going to ground me?" I ask quietly.

A moment passes in which Mom looks to be on the verge of tears. "Your father and I, we trust you. We know that you made a mistake, but there's nothing that can be gained from hindsight except a lesson learned. Punishment won't get you your sight back, nor will sitting in a corner and thinking about what you've done. But thinking about what you *will* do from this day forward, that's worthwhile. I'm guessing you'll be much more careful from now on?"

I give my mom a hardcore deadpan look. I can't believe what I'm hearing! Can *you* believe it? She's being *so* New Age right now. In fact, she's very nearly condoning my actions! That, or she's indeed so rattled about her little boy having lost his eyesight that she can't bear to make him more miserable than he already is. Any other mom would've ripped me a new one by now. But not Mom. She feels I've suffered enough—I hate her for it. I hate her for not stopping me from destroying myself. I want her to yell at me, to punish me, to beat the fear of the Internet into me so that I'll no longer want anything to do with SuperMegaNet.

Instead, she hugs me and presses me into her arms and weeps for a few minutes. In the end, I'm the one doing the consoling, the coaxing, the coddling.

"Don't worry," I say, smoothing her hair, trying to calm her down enough so that I can extricate myself from this totally awkward moment. "We'll get through this. We will."

She continues crying for a while longer before finally letting go of me, leaning back, and dabbing at her cheeks with the backs of her hands. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be freaking out like this, now should I?"

Yes! Please, freak out! Use your anger! It makes you stronger! "It's okay."

"You poor thing. You look so tired. Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap?"

I nod, getting to my feet.

Mom stands, too, and grips my shoulders. "In the meantime, I'm canceling all my appointments and parking myself in front of the computer for the rest of the afternoon. If Dr. Kim won't fix you, I'm sure I can use Google to find someone who will. Don't you worry."

I let her kiss my forehead; I let her smooth my hair; I let her drift down the hall on high hopes. I should be at least marginally happy that I've not been reprimanded, but I'm not. In fact, I feel all the heavier as I climb the stairs and shuffle toward my room.

Inside, I close and lock the door behind me. I want to snuggle up in my bed, but am too tired to clear off Beta's junk, so I head for my sleeping bag on the floor—and stop two steps in, sensing that something's not right. Someone's been here recently, someone beside Beta. There are chocolate smudges on my desktop, there's a residue of fat in the air—Ernie's sitting cross-legged beside my dresser. He's got a large pizza box in his lap and the most pathetic expression on his face.

"Hey," he says, smiling wanly.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I came to bury the ratchet."

I stare at him.

He stares back.

He really does look pathetic.

I sit beside him with my legs drawn up, my chin resting on my knees. "I think you mean, 'bury the hatchet.'" Pause. Then, quietly: "Fat boy."

Ernie slides the pizza box in front of me. "I got you a little present. I know you're a vegetarian and all, so I ordered half with sausage and pepperoni, half with bell peppers, olives, and onions."

I lift the cover, peek inside. Two remaining slices are swimming in a pool of grease. "Ernie, you've practically eaten the whole thing." (Not that I'd care to clog my colon anyhow.)

"I know. I ate my half...and some of yours. I didn't know how long it would be before you got home."

"Well, I'm here. What did you want?"

Ernie pouts at me. "Don't tell your parents."

"I already did."

"Crap." Ernie splays his legs, stares sullenly at his feet. "So...I guess you got your eyes fixed?"

I shake my head. "My doctor won't look at me. I have to wear these special contacts if I want to see."

"I heard they have X-ray contacts that let you see through a girl's clothes. Do yours do that?"

"No."

"Can you watch 3D movies on them?"

"No."

Ernie looks disappointed. "Oh, well. I guess they're still kind of cool anyway."

"I guess."

A moment of silence.

"So, I bet you're grounded, huh?"

"I don't know," I say. "I think my parents are using some kind of guilt thing against me. My mom says she trusts me. My dad's making me lunch."

"Freaking rich people. Afraid to get your hands dirty with a good old-fashioned paddling, so you turn everything into psychological timeout."

"I'm not rich."

"You're well-to-fugging-do, then."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've seen your house, and I've seen Eva's, and Jan's. Me and Eva are middle-class. Jan's mud-hut poor. You, you're a rich white boy."

"Dude," I say, "I'm half Asian."

"Okay, so you're a rich, white Asian."

I shake my head. "Ernie, is there a point to this conversation?"

Ernie shrugs. "Not really. I just wanted to get in some quality time."

"Okay, well, it's been a blast. Now, can you go away and let me take a nap?"

Ernie starts to get up, stops, plops himself back down and blurts out, "I don't want to go."

Oh, geez. "Why not?"

"Because I don't know if I'll ever come back."

"We live in the same town, you know," I remind him. "We don't need SuperMegaNet to hang out."

"But we *don't*. Hang out, I mean. You're always at your mom's gym, or at that shrink of yours. Eva's always at practice. Jan...well, he's always home—but his Internet connection is so weak I may as well not know him at all."

"Maybe that's the point."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe SuperMegaNet started something that wasn't meant to be."

"That's dumb," Ernie says. "You're over-analyzing."

"I'm just saying that the Internet makes us do things we wouldn't normally do. We treat each other like screen names instead of like actual people. The Internet makes us weird."

"Dude, we're *already* weird."

A look of denial accidentally crosses my face for a second.

Ernie catches it, jabs his finger at me. "You especially, Biclops! I mean, a Russian-Asian half-breed who listens to *Asia*, a band that has no Asian members and whose music has nothing to do with the actual continent besides the fact that they once played in Japan in 1983? Come on!"

"We need to make non-Internet friends," I say, choosing to ignore the Asia comment. "Real friends."

"I see what's happening here," Ernie says. "You want to force-feed Eva your love, she'll have none of it, and so now you're going to take your epic fail and eff off for a while."

"For good—"

"Meanwhile, me and Janny Boy are collateral damage. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger's career after he made *Collateral Damage*."

"I don't understand why it matters so much to you. You've got your 213 SuperMegaNet friends, right?"

Ernie sighs, long and low, causing the air around him to smell like Skittles. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone before."

"Okay."

"I don't have any friends. Those 213 losers on my buddy list...they're just screen names, people I added to make my list look cool. I don't know any of them."

"Big deal," I say. "I already knew that."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know anyone *else*, either."

"What about offline friends? From your neighborhood, your old school?"

"Dude, no one wants to hang with a loud-mouthed fat-ass who, until I was assigned to you guys, spends all his time gaming and eating and doing homework just so he can keep his grades barely above the threshold that allows him to keep his

'special' status."

"But...what about...?" I trail off. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, well, now you do. That's why SuperMegaNet is so important to me. You guys are all I have."

I narrow my eyes. "You're lying—this is just some scheme to trick me into changing my mind."

"I'd never lie about being this pathetic."

"That's probably true," I say, considering.

Not waiting for me to work it out in my head, Ernie play-hugs me, pretends to kiss me. "Come on. Let's stay friends, 'kay?"

I push him away—but not before I hear Jan's voice through my computer speakers:

"Hey, what are you guys doing?"

"Trying to have make-up sex!" Ernie screams. "Get lost, Czech!"

"Ew, no!" I gasp, and jump to my feet, brush myself off (because that's what you do when your fat buddy tries to make out with you).

Ernie laughs. "Dude, I was kidding. I don't even like Asians. Especially not half-breeds—"

Mom knocks on the bedroom door. "Theo?"

Ernie wobbles to his feet, makes as if to hide.

"No," I tell him. "It doesn't matter. She knows." I go over to the door, unlocking and opening it.

Mom steps inside.

Ernie's red in the face...though I can tell by the way he's sneaking glances at Mom's legs that he's not entirely averse to her presence.

"Hello, Mrs. Ivanovich," he says.

Mom nods at him. "Ernie, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. It's my good pal Theo here I'm worried about." He puts his arm around my shoulders and squeezes. "I hear he's going through some dark times."

I glare at him. "Time to go home."

He nods sheepishly, goes over to my computer, clicks the "Send Home" button —and starts shrieking horribly as he begins to upload.

Mom cups her hand over her mouth—

—and just as suddenly as he started screaming, Ernie starts giggling as the last of him fades away. "Just kidding! Later, Mrs. Ivanovich!"

I glance over at my mom.

"My goodness," she says after a moment. "What computers can do these days."

## The Taqueria of Lost Souls

**Ernie's Note:** Before we go any further, I'd like to post a little disclaimer clarifying what I said in "Pizza Box Reconciliation" about not having any friends. I've got friends—*213* friends. I've got a *girl*friend. The Beckster. She's a little shy, and a little fat. Okay, she's a lot fat. She needs to go on a diet even more than Gabriel Iglesias does, but that's another discussion. I just told Theo what I told him because I wanted to make him feel better. Besides, I think we've all had enough of his "woe is me, I'm blind but can see!" phase. He's got one of those shiny ABC Family families. If they can afford that big ol' house of theirs, they can afford to buy him new eyes—or whatever it is rich people buy when they go blind. Let him fiack off for a while if he thinks it's good for him. It's no honey off my bun.

* * *

**@ernie**

Sexless Gamer, Twitterpated, Stood-Up Download Dater, Facebooked, and Self-Published Author are sitting beside me at the taco window. As their nicknames suggest (I really don't care to ask anyone's real name at the moment), they're all total losers, and their lives have all been delivered into sucktitude by the Internet and/or SuperMegaNet. This much I've learned while waiting for my nacho platter to be ready.

"The Internet has shrouded society behind a veil of superficiality, #truth," Twitterpated says to no one in particular. (Apparently his thing is that he's overused Twitter, and so can now only think, speak, or write in 140-character blocks that include interesting links or trendy hashtags. Plus, I think he's a little tipsy.) "@DownloadDater is living proof that online dating is *not* a victimless crime. http://on.msnbc.com/gTdnMi"

*Fugh.* I don't know how I've come to be part of this motley crew—oh, wait. That's not true. I *do* know: Theo and Eva have sworn off SuperMegaNet; Jan, he's too poor to do anything but check his e-mail using his parents' archaic Internet connection. The rest is God rubbing it in, arranging all the stars and planets or whatever so that my fat, lonely self just *happened* to download to the same taqueria as the other rejects.

"I don't understand," Download Dater says to Sexless Gamer while the rest of us listen in. "Everything was going so well. We went for three months without missing a chat. We talked about everything under the sun. I told her things I could

never tell anyone else. She said the same about me. We just seemed to click, you know?"

Behind the counter, Tacoman—this hairy, thickly-mustached Mexican dude who always looks like he just messed his pants—nods empathically as he works a can of black olives into my nacho platter.

"When I heard about SuperMegaNet," Dater continues, "I suggested we both install it so that we could finally meet in person. We picked a place and time; she seemed really enthusiastic over the whole thing. I downloaded—and she wasn't there. I waited ten minutes, twenty minutes, but she never showed up. So, I went back home thinking she needed help with her webcam or something. I checked her video feed, and her room was empty. I ended up waiting around all afternoon thinking something terrible had happened. Finally, she got back. She had someone with her. Turns out she'd downloaded into some *other* chat room, met a guy, and decided she liked him better." Dater scowls. "Now I have to watch the two of them make out because SuperMegaNet won't let me remove her from my buddy list."

Sexless Gamer shakes his head ruefully, causing the fat beneath his chin to jiggle. "Heartless biatches. They say men are jerks, but *they're* the ones who're always the coldest."

Twitterpated, Facebooked, and Self-Published Author grumble in agreement.

I don't say anything one way or the other. One, because no one ever wants to listen to the fat kid. Two, because I know that no one likes to hear the truth. Which, by the way, goes a little something like this: dork—no one goes online to *meet* people. To keep in touch with friends and family they already know, maybe; to collaborate with coworkers, sure; to lace their hard drive with gigabytes of free Internet porn, hell yeah—but *never* to meet someone whose name, age, and sex can only be confirmed via a user profile. You totally should've seen this coming. Dumbass.

I glance over at the far end of the counter, where Facebooked and Self-Published Author have started talking about how they'd like to create their own Utopian social network complete with a criticism-free comment system. Listening to their naïvety is depressing...and yet it's inspiring, too. I mean, I may be having friend problems right now, but at least I know what's going on and am working to fix it. These guys are just deluded. Bitterness and moderate HTML skills can't create a better Facebook—and everyone knows self-publishing, just like traditional publishing, only works for writers who've *already* established themselves.

Where the hell are my nachos? They're taking *forever* today. The more time I have to kill, the more I keep getting these flashes of insight. Like right now. There's a comic page floating in my mind's eye. In the first panel, a manga version of Theo is sitting cross-legged and straight-backed on the floor of his bedroom, which has become an exaggerated Zen monastery meditation chamber. He's staring mindlessly at the TV as he plays Wii. In the second panel, Beta's downloading into the room; in the third, he's sitting beside Theo and picking up the second Wii controller.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," Theo echoes.

(Frame four: Both of them are sitting and staring mindlessly at the TV.)

"How are the eyes?"

"Still New."

"Huh."

*Poof!* The most boring comic in the world vanishes from my head. It leaves a lingering afterimage behind—because I know what I saw is most likely what's actually going on in Theo's bedroom this very moment. He'd rather be lame than be friends. Freaking Biclops.

At long last Tacoman slides in front of me a cardboard tray smothering under six layers of cheese and chips.

"Here is heart attack, *mi gordito*," he says, matter-of-factly.

("*Gordito*" is Mexican for "good friend," by the way. I'm not a total noob.)

I grab the nacho platter with both hands and, careful not to drip grease on my shirt, head over to where Tacoman has his laptop and webcam set up. As is his custom, he hits the "Send Home" button without even saying goodbye. That's fine by me. All I want right now is to be alone with my food, my misery.

The world pixelates, smooths out again. I'm back in my bedroom—

—and so is Becky.

She's got "WTF?" written on her forehead in bright red ink.

## Sneaky Lip Maneuver

**@ernie**

"You're late, Ernie," Becky says, arms folded, freckles bunching angrily around her nose. It looks like she's been folding my laundry to pass the time.

"Um...you've got red marker on your face," I tell her.

She wipes the back of her arm across her forehead, and the ink disappears. "Don't change the subject."

I go over to my desk and drag one of my arms across the top, knocking empty soda cans and honey bun boxes onto the floor so as to make room for the nacho platter. "What subject?"

"You were *supposed* to meet me for breakfast this morning. You were *supposed* to be my Calorie Coach, remember?"

For tit's sake, not the diet thing again— "Oh, you were serious about that?"

"Um, *yeah*!"

I don't really want to, but I turn around and face Becky, and, sure enough, she totally looks like she's convinced herself that I've somehow ruined her day.

She walks around me, putting herself between me and the desk. "I tried to tell my parents that I wanted to start watching my weight, but they didn't listen—just like I knew they wouldn't. 'You're too young to be thinking about things like diets!' they told me. My dad said I was being silly, and my mom just piled more waffles onto my plate. I couldn't help myself, Ernie. I ate everything. I wanted to vomit after. I'd broken my own promise—you'd broken *your* promise."

"Hey, wait a minute," I say, jabbing my finger at her. "You may have asked me, *in passing*, to help you count a calorie here or there—the jury's still out on that one —but I never made any *promises*."

"Of course not! You never think about anyone but yourself!"

Lies! "That's not true. I'm thinking about you right now."

Becky looks hopeful. "Really?"

"Sure. I'm wondering when you're going to upload back home and let me eat my dunch in peace."

Storm clouds brew behind Becky's eyes like some cheesy Hollywood effect. "Ernie, I...*dunch*?"

"Duh," I say, rolling my eyes. "It's the meal that's between lunch and dinner."

"That's ridiculous. There's no such thing as a meal between lunch and dinner."

"Sure there is. It's just like brunch, except it's after noon and before five."

"You can *snack* between lunch and dinner, you can have a late lunch or an early

dinner, but there's no actual *meal* between noon and five. That's just stupid!"

"Meh," I grunt, glancing past her and wondering if she's the slightest bit aware that the cheese on my nacho platter is starting to congeal—and it hits me. I see what's going on here. It's a dominance thing. Becky can't control her poundage, so she's decided to try controlling *me* instead by placing herself in a position of power—between me and my food!

I grab her shoulders and move her out of the way. She stands off to the side, watches in grossed-out fascination as I avail myself of Tacoman's glorious culinary handiwork.

"Don't you see what you're doing?" she asks quietly after I've devoured the topmost layer.

"What?" I ask her, my mouth full. "What am I doing?"

"You're medicating yourself with food. You need this diet more than I do."

"You make it sound like I'm snorting cocaine—"

"You clearly have an eating problem, Ernie!"

"And *you* clearly have an acute case of the nags!"

Becky goes quiet for a moment. Then she says, "I saw the photograph."

"What photograph?" I ask.

"Look."

I glance over my shoulder.

Becky pulls a piece of paper out of her jeans pocket, unfolds it. "I was bored waiting for you to get back, so I went on your computer for a while." She holds the paper out for me to see. On it is a photograph of me and my parents from two years ago. They look so alive. And me, I'm so thin, so reasonably fit, a healthy ten-year-old—

Goddamnit! I knew I never should've given her my password! I grab the printout from her; I turn around again, angry, ready to attack the nacho platter with renewed vigor, but Becky grabs me, brings me face-to-face with her so that her pug nose is pressed into my cheek. She nibbles sloppily at my mouth, trying to find the right positioning—then she locks in, plants one on me like some kind of vacuum hose with eyes. Never mind that I've got sour cream on my lips and pinto bean skins stuck to my teeth; she's got me in an air-tight lip-lock, one of those dirty ones where the girl basically jams her tongue down your throat and all you can do is grab onto her booty for support. It's kind of gross...but it's kind of cool. I mean, I'm kissing a girl. Even if it *is* just the Beckster.

After a while she breaks it off and steps back.

"Now," she says, spitting a stray piece of tomato into her hand and frowning distastefully. "Wasn't that better than nachos?"

I blink at her. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"I'm *trying* to show you that there are other things worth your time, things beside food. And if you come on this diet with me, we can keep our mouths occupied in...other ways."

She *is* trying to seduce me!

"I think you should know," I say, "that offering your body to me in exchange

for my going on your little diet makes you look really slutty."

Becky throws her arms up in the air, exasperated. "Ernie, I'm not offering my whole *body* to you, I'm saying we can make out instead of—oh, never mind! Are you going to be my Calorie Coach or not?"

"Can't I coach your calories without touching my own? Sort of like how a P.E. teacher eats a Philly cheese steak while telling his students to run the mile?"

"Okay, bottom line," Becky says. "Me or food. Choose."

I want to help her. Kind of. But, well...nachos, you know?

My hand slides across the desk of its own accord, reaches for the computer mouse—

"Ernie! Don't you dare!" Becky warns—

—but it's too late. I've already clicked the "Send Home" button.

She vanishes.

I sit at my desk. I've still got the family photo in my hand. I look at it once more before grabbing another nacho. This one's got two pinto beans and an olive slice on it that makes it look like a face. "Stupid girl," I tell the nacho. "She thinks my eating is the result of some sort of repressed emotion, a dietary substitute for coping with the loss of my mom and dad in that freak Wal-Mart stampede. Doesn't she know it's because you taste so delicious?" I tickle the nacho with my tongue. "Yes, you do. Yes, you do!"

I resume my eating, subconsciously crumbling the family photo in my hand and dropping it into the wastebasket beside the desk.

# Chogurt

**@jan**

"So, this is what it feels like to be on your way out," Ernie sighs, sitting across from me at our usual lunch table. "To know your best days are behind you and yet to have to carry on as if anything you do from here on out will have the slightest significance—like Phil Collins after *Tarzan*."

Wonderful. Another patented Monday afternoon Ernie Goodale Self-Pity Buffet. Not as gross as his usual cream-filled sponge cake inhalation ritual, but definitely twice as annoying.

"What are you talking about?" I ask (might as well be polite).

"I'm talking about our final days as SuperMegaNet users. I'm talking about Theo's parents freaking out over what happened to him during the weekend. I'm talking about them calling your parents, Eva's parents, my grandparents—"

"I've been meaning to ask you about Theo, and Eva—"

"Don't interrupt, Czech!" Ernie dabs at his sweaty brow with his shirtsleeve. I've never seen him so worked up over something not involving porn. "I'm talking about every legal guardian within a fifty-mile radius converging on a single Denny's and laying out plans for the complete and total annihilation of SuperMegaNet!"

"Theo told his parents about SuperMegaNet?"

"You bet your European ash he did!"

I smirk. "So, he broke your little pact."

"*Our* pact! We're all in this together! At least, we were *supposed* to be before our chinky computer nerd friend threw a tattle festival and laid everything out for his mommy and daddy!"

Makes sense. Not that I've been sitting around expecting Theo to be the first to blab; it just makes sense that if anyone blabbed first, it would be him. "What do you mean by 'tattle festival?'"

"I mean he rented a giant circus tent and some trapeze artists and a couple of Bengal tigers and sold his gullible parents overpriced tickets to the spectacle of the century!"

"Why would he do that? The breaking our pact thing, that is. Not your twisted little fantasy about giant circus tents."

Ernie rolls his eyes. "Theo has hamster eyes. Geez, don't you pay attention to anything?"

Hamster eyes? "Huh?"

"Apparently, he was jealous of you and how you're like sex-glue to Bug Eyes. He

couldn't stand the thought of you having her first, so he got New Eyes last week. He thought he'd look less geeky without glasses. Stupid idiot he is, he got so worried that his parents would find out that he tried to get his old eyes back, and he ended up messing his original eyes up period. But don't tell him that I told you any of this."

Wow. I didn't know Theo liked Eva. "Is he okay?"

Ernie shrugs. "He's got these special contacts. They don't let him watch movies or see through girls' skirts or anything, but I guess they're better than nothing."

I nod. I think I understand why Theo would want to stop using SMN—why our parents would want us to stop, too. It just makes weird kids weirder.

Ernie shakes his head woefully, removes a gigantic 64-ounce tub of Mountain High yogurt from his backpack, sets it on the tabletop.

"*What* is that?" I ask, bewildered. Really, I've never seen anyone store an entire tub of Mountain High in their backpack until lunchtime.

"It's yogurt," Ernie replies. "Duh."

"*You're* eating yogurt?"

"My grandparents are dead-set on having me lose weight. But I'm two steps ahead."

He winks at me and reaches back into the pack, withdraws a Hershey's chocolate bar, breaks it into a dozen or so chunks, and sets the chunks neatly on a napkin. He pops the lid off the yogurt container, fetches a wooden spoon, and starts stirring in the chocolate.

"Presto!" he exclaims after about a minute of careful ministrations. He holds out a gob for me to see. "Chogurt!"

The whole Theo/SuperMegaNet thing is momentarily gone from my mind as I watch Ernie avail himself of his new culinary creation. If you can call it that. "I'm amazed, Ernie. But is it safe to eat yogurt that's been sitting in your backpack all morning?"

While continuing to eat, Ernie uses his free hand to tilt his open backpack toward me so that I can see inside. There are no books, no binders—just bagged ice.

Unbelievable.

A pair of older students passes our table. When they see what Ernie's doing, they stop talking and merely stare, mesmerized.

I cover my face with my hand and wait for them to go away.

## Frosted Netbook

**@jan**

You know, I've had my suspicions before, but now I'm sure: Ernie is almost as much of a worrywart as Theo is. He just worries about different things, things that are inconsequential (and therefore unnoticeable) to the rest of us. Like the soda machine running out of cherry cola before lunchtime, ants infiltrating the stash of M&Ms in his locker, and, now, the possibility that he may be grounded off of SuperMegaNet for an undetermined amount of time. However, unlike Theo, who tires himself out at his mom's gym everyday so that he simply doesn't have the energy to worry anymore, Ernie's approach is to medicate himself with food.

Chogurt, in this case.

I don't really want to sit here and watch him convert calories to fat, but I don't have anywhere else to go. High school kids don't want to hang out with twelve-year-olds who have thick accents.

"Ernie," I say, watching him dig chunks of chocolate out of his tub, "I think an entire Hershey's bar defeats the purpose of eating yogurt in the first place."

"Shows what you know," he snaps. "Yogurt has probiotic microbes in it. They digest all the sugar while I get to savor all the sweetness."

"Um...I don't think that's how it works."

"What do you know? Do they even *have* yogurt over in Brno?"

"*Yes*." I fold my arms, narrow my eyes. "And, for your information, they have running water and electricity, too."

Ernie cradles his tub. "Yeah, well, good for the gosh-darned Czechs and their post-war openness toward modern-day conveniences."

I sigh. "You're convinced your grandparents are going to tell you that you can't use SuperMegaNet anymore, aren't you?"

"They *will*."

"Suppose they do, then. SMN can't be uninstalled, remember? Not without a hammer."

"Or a bulldozer," Ernie mumbles, and stuffs his mouth with another dollop of chogurt.

"Right," I say. "Even if Theo's parents tell our parents what we've been doing, and even if our parents end up punishing us, we can probably still find a way to use the program. And if we don't, not having SMN isn't such a bad thing, is it?"

"It's a *horrible* thing!"

I roll my eyes. "I keep telling you, we live in the same city, we go to the same

school. We don't *need* SuperMegaNet."

"But SuperMegaNet is *ours*. It's *our* secret thing! You don't know parents. You may *think* you know yours, but you don't. They're always working in the background, always *doing* things, moving pieces around on their parental chessboard. Mark my words, this very moment they're swarming together to decide what to do about the chat software that's turned their precious little Kounicova into an exhibitionist."

"How am I an exhibitionist?"

"Come on. Conveniently falling asleep in your underwear that night Eva sneaked over?"

"It was hot—and I was tired. And I've worn pajamas to bed every night since then, just so you know."

Ernie wags his wooden spoon at me. "Look, stop talking about yourself for a second and listen. We need to formulate our game plan."

"I wasn't talking about myself. I was pointing out that—"

"I've given it some thought," Ernie interrupts, "and I'm not letting my grandparents get the drop on me. So, I took some proactive steps. You should, too."

"What, like deleting the SMN shortcut icons from my desktop and Start menu?"

Ernie shakes his head, unzips one of the outer pockets of his backpack, pulls out a small Acer netbook. It's pink; the lid is partially covered by frost. "Let them take away my Internet privileges. Let them replace my computer with a life-sized Jesus statue. I'll just use this netbook."

"Ernie, that's a girl's laptop," I tell him.

"Yep. I borrowed it from Summer." He opens the lid and starts working the touchpad. "I'll just log her out of her SMN account—" He flinches suddenly. "Holy crapsicles."

"What?" I ask. I can't see the screen—but I don't need to. Summer's voice comes blaring through the laptop's speakers loud and clear:

"Ernie! I should've known! You bring my laptop back right this instant or I'm going to—why's my webcam picture so fuzzy? Is that...are those *icicles*?"

Ernie lowers his eyelids and waves his hand dismissively. "Relax, it's just a little permafrost from my backpack."

Summer's voice raises several decibels. "You *froze* my computer?"

"I didn't *freeze* it. It's just a little cold. And besides, it's only an Acer. If by some miracle I manage to break the thing, what's that to you? A hundred bucks in couch cushion change?"

"But it's *mine*!"

Frowning, Ernie says, "I thought you were a cheerleader."

"I *am*!"

"Well, there you go."

"There I go *what*?"

"Everyone knows cheerleading is a rich white girl sport. That makes you a rich

white girl who can easily afford to replace her puny little Acer netbook with one of the three or four Apple laptops lying around your parents' five-bedroom house."

"Give me back my laptop, Ernie!" Summer screams, causing the laptop to jump in Ernie's hands.

"I'm kind of at school right now," he says.

"No excuses!"

"But I downloaded your laptop using my home computer. If I upload it from somewhere else, you'll be getting a copy of the original—"

"I don't care! Find a way!"

Ernie scoffs. He pushes the Mountain High tub toward me. "Here, cover for me."

"Where are you going?" I ask as he gets up.

"If she wants it back so badly, I'll just upload it to her using one of the computers in the school library. Let her deal with the rest, stupid *gurl*!"

Before I can say anything else, he leaves the table, waddling angrily across the quad and shouting at Summer's netbook at the top of his lungs.

*Bože na nebi*, he's going to get himself thrown in detention.

# In the Library, Everyone Can Hear You Scream

**@ernie**

I'm a numbers guy. Letters mean nothing to me. I like words even less. Words compiled into monotonous biographies or strung along into chains of flowery phrases about dainty fairies and magic unicorns actually give me indigestion.

Naturally, it goes without saying that stepping into a building dedicated entirely to the preservation of words makes me extremely gassy. That's why I fart on entering the Boca Linda library. That's why everyone abruptly stops what they're doing, turns, and looks at me while the sound echoes, reverberates off the walls and windows, and eventually fades into the stacks.

"Ew!" Summer shouts. "Did you just *fart* on my netbook?"

"No yelling in the library!" I shout back, slamming her netbook shut.

The librarian lady sitting at the nearby help desk looks up from whatever she's doing and gives me a dirty look.

"Young man, can I help you?" she asks.

"I, uh, need to study for a pop quiz," I say, and quickly move past her, trying to put as much distance between me and the stink cloud as possible.

The creamy center of the library is all cramped tables stuffed between towering bookshelves that reach up to the ceiling. There are desktop computers here and there, but they're all being used at the moment. Stupid high schoolers. Probably checking their *World of Warcraft* accounts or looking up various cures for acne. I mean, J.H. Christ, look at all the nerds. Tall, skinny nerds; short, fat nerds; nerds with glasses, nerds with bigger glasses, nerds with big, brown, semi-Asian eyes and perfectly-smooth complexions on well-balanced semi-Asian faces—

—Theo.

Of *course* he'd be here.

I sidle on over to where he's sitting and trying to hide behind his ginormous Toshiba Satellite.

"So, this is where you've been hiding out, huh?" I say, sitting next to him and setting Summer's netbook beside the Toshiba. It looks like a flimsy plastic toy by comparison.

"Oh, hey, Ernie," Theo whispers, totally pretending he didn't see or hear me come in. "Did you get lost on your way to the cafeteria?"

"It's nice to know the New Eyes haven't affected your smart-aleck tendencies."

Theo's eyes boggle, and he glances quickly around before grabbing me by the shirt collar and yanking me face-to-face. "Dude, that's *personal*, remember?"

"Fine, fine," I say, and loosen myself from his grip. I open Summer's netbook. She's still got her face pressed up against her webcam (or the webcam of whomever's computer she's using at the moment).

"Why don't I have my netbook back already, *Ernie*?" she screams.

"Why don't you calm down already!" I scream back.

"Um, excuse me," the librarian calls out from behind her desk. "There's no yelling in the library."

The girl on the other side of me looks like I'm invading her space, and scoots her chair a few inches in the opposite direction.

"It's not *me*," I tell the librarian. "It's the powder-puff girl here." I point at the netbook screen.

The librarian frowns.

I nudge Theo in the ribs. "Hey."

"What?" he asks.

"I need to borrow your laptop for a sec."

He narrows his eyes. "What for?"

"So I can send Summer her laptop back."

He pays the netbook a glance. "What are you doing with Summer's laptop?"

"Duh! I'm sending it back to her."

"Well, you can't. I don't have SMN installed."

"Install it, then!"

Theo shakes his head. "No way. This is my work laptop."

"Come on."

"No, Ernie."

"Come *on*."

"*No*."

I sigh. "If you don't, I'll start having sex with the table."

He looks at me, narrows his eyes...calls my bluff. "No."

"Fine. Have it your way." I grasp the tabletop with my hand and start gyrating in my chair. I can hear several of the other students (Summer, too) gasping in disgust. "How long, Theo? How long are you going to let this go on? A minute? Five? Ten? Long enough for me to get my babies up inside this table so that, nine months from now, she'll be giving birth to a whole litter of half-flesh, half-wood bastard tables that nobody will want because of the moral implications of human-furniture interbreeding—"

Theo's resolve cracks; he slides his laptop in front of me. "Okay, *okay*! You can use my laptop—just stop humping the table!"

Placid Ernie mode activated.

I do my thing, downloading, installing, and launching SuperMegaNet. Then I set Summer's netbook in front of Theo's beast, click "Send Home," and we're good to go. The netbook winks out of existence.

"Oh, *wow*," says the guy sitting across from me. "Did you just...how did you —?"

"Dude," I say. "SuperMegaNet. Ultimate collaboration. Get with the times."

On Theo's screen, Summer is picking her netbook up, turning it over in her hands, scrutinizing the LCD for signs of fatness. When she's satisfied I haven't voided the warranty, she scowls at me one last time and walks away.

I slide Theo's laptop back in front of him. I'm about to say thanks, but he's not looking at me. He's looking *behind* me.

I turn around; the librarian chick is standing over me, and she's got an I-hate-you look on her face.

"Okay, you two," she says to me, to Theo. "That's quite enough. I want you both to go to the Principal's office immediately."

She hands each of us a pink slip.

Theo nearly chokes as he takes his. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I had nothing to do with this. I don't even know who this fat-ass is! He just came and sat by me..." He trails off, realizing he's just said "ass" to a teacher.

Mark my words: Theo may look all cute and innocent, but he's got a temper.

Time for damage control.

"I apologize, ma'am," I tell the librarian, scooping up Theo's laptop, his books. "He's kind of tightly-wound, if you know what I mean. I'll make sure he gets to the Principal's office safe and sound."

Theo tries to set me on fire with his eyes as we make our way towards the entrance. "I've *never* had to go to the Principal's office before. Thanks a lot, fat crap."

Water douses fire. "You've got to watch that potty mouth, Junior. It'll cause you nothing but trouble."

Theo wrinkles up his nose.

I realize it's because of the stink cloud hovering near the help desk.

"Ew," he gasps. "It smells like a fart in here."

"It wasn't me," I lie.

# Parent-Counselor Meeting

**@thrailkill**

Let's be honest with each other: parent-counselor meetings are bull. This isn't about your children's academic careers. It's about *you*. Your child failed a test, defaced a brick wall, or lost her virtue in a toilet stall, and you're worried it's going to make you look bad in front of the other suburbanites. Your precious little ones have proved themselves to be not so little anymore; you simply can't come to terms with the fact that they might be exploring their limits, pushing their boundaries, following their pubertal programming. Naturally, you feel the need to assign blame.

And I'm your first target.

It's not your fault. With the possible exception of Grandma and Grandpa Womack, you're all children of suburbia. You've spent more than half a decade turning your offspring over to the county five days a week, nine months out of the year. You hardly ever see them save for the occasional, unintentional conversation over breakfast or in the car while on the way to the grocery store. You haven't a clue what sort of progress the public school system has made raising your children. Had you a clue, you might not have jumped the gun and organized this little impromptu meeting to rectify something that you yourselves should have been aware of at the very start of the school year.

So. Let's see what we have here. Mr. and Mrs. Womack, the haggard grandparents, stuck with the responsibility of raising a plump little handful of a grandson long after you raised your own children and thought the worst was past. Judging from the way you're slouching in your chair, I'm guessing your concern, Grandpa, is centered mostly around having to leave the safety of your favorite recliner for the unwanted privilege of attending a bona fide Parent Party—but you, Grandma, there's ice in your eyes, venom dribbling down your chin. You have purpose. You're the kind of woman who spends an entire weekend carefully composing hand-written letters to all the television stations broadcasting junk food commercials aimed at kids. You want blood.

You, Mrs. Taylor...you merely want an easy solution, a quick fix. I see your kind in here all the time. You're the picturesque soccer mom (yes, I'm quite aware that Eva is on the wrestling team), thirty-something, slightly bedraggled despite the fact that it's four-thirty in the afternoon. You've been housekeeping, running errands all day, and now you're desperate to sort out your daughter's affairs before dinnertime, before your office jockey husband comes home asking for a full report

over chicken and mashed potatoes.

Mr. and Mrs. Kounicova—you're the foreigners. Your presence here is strictly for show; you have no real interest in the nuances of American scholastics. Were you in Brno right now, and had your little Jan indeed been caught doing something he shouldn't have been doing, the solution would be swift and severe punishment, plain and simple. But instead, you've got to sit here and chat it out with the other moms and dads, because here in America discipline is handled by the proper authorities. Here, parents who take matters into their own hands end up behind bars or on daytime talk shows.

That leaves us with you, Mr. and Mrs. Ivanovich. The mismatched New Agers. An uncommonly youthful-looking, attractive, and empowered mother; a husband coping with an obvious inadequacy complex. Yes, you're clinging by a thread, aren't you, Mr. Ivanovich?

It doesn't surprise me that it's your wife, the alpha female, as it were, who's clearing her throat, sitting forward, and, much like her son before her, looking overly concerned about the amount of cigarette smoke filling my office as she delivers the first allegation: "Mrs. Thrailkill. Theo tells me you assigned him a homework project involving a video chat program called SuperMegaNet?"

Cry "havoc" and let slip the dogs of war.

## Parental Politics

**@anya**

So, this is a parent-counselor meeting. I don't think I've ever been to one. Theo's never gotten bad grades, has never been caught cheating on a test or cutting class—he's never done anything to warrant my hanging around campus any longer than it takes to drop him off in the morning or pick him up in the afternoon. I hardly know the place. It took me ten minutes to find the counseling office, and that was with Mike's help.

The room is dimly lit. Myself, Mike, and the other parents sit in uncomfortable plastic chairs. No one's said anything about the layers of cigarette smoke clouding the air, so I can only assume this is how they do things here at Boca Linda. I can't say I like it. Secondhand smoke'll kill you deader than dead, but Mrs. Thrailkill doesn't seem to care. She merely sits behind her polished mahogany desk and stares me down through the haze.

Mrs. Womack leans forward and, holding her nose, shoots me an accusing look. "SuperMegaNet? What's that?"

"Apparently," Mr. Womack offers (and not without a hint of amusement), "it's what's been occupying our grandson's time between school and lights out."

"It's a video chat program," I explain. "It lets you upload to other people's homes. My son Theo showed me."

"Computers can do that?" asks Mr. Kounicova.

"They can send paperless mail too, *miláčku*," replies Mrs. Kounicova, jokingly.

"*So*," Mrs. Womack huffs in my direction. "Theo's the one who's coerced my Ernest into installing this...this *SuperMegaNet* on his computer?"

The poor woman. A lifetime of cultivated dissatisfaction has left her face wrinkled, languid. Had we gotten off on the right foot, I might have offered her a free facial rejuve pack after the meeting as a friendly gesture between parents. Had we gotten off on the right foot. "Theo would never *coerce* anyone into doing something they don't want to do."

"Maybe he didn't do it on purpose. Maybe he thought he was being helpful when he suggested—"

"Are you blaming Theo for your grandson's inability to make his own decisions?"

Mrs. Womack puts her hand to her cheek, as if I've just slapped her across the face.

Thrailkill looks impressed.

"Regardless of who installed what where and when," Mrs. Taylor says to Mrs. Womack, "the fact of the matter is your grandson now has unrestricted access to my daughter's bedroom."

"It works the other way, too," Mrs. Womack points out. "*Your* daughter now has access to *my* grandson's bedroom."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

A brightly-colored health meter has just materialized above Mrs. Womack's head; daggers are about to fly—

"It *means*," Mike says, clearing his throat loudly and making a cease-fire motion with his hands, "we can all agree that maybe we should've been contacted by Mrs. Thrailkill here *before* our kids were assigned to use the Internet in an unorthodox manner."

Womack's health meter vanishes.

We all look expectantly at Mrs. Thrailkill.

She seems slightly less amused, though she's still smiling. "So, I'm to inherit the hot potato, am I?" She takes a long, slow drag from her cigarette, leans back in her chair. "I assigned Theo, Ernie, Eva, and Jan to work together online, yes. I assumed AIM was good enough, but it would seem my notion of online collaboration is antiquated. The little ruffians have improvised, purely of their own accord, I assure you." Another drag from her cigarette. "I merely intended for them to network with one another as a means of improving their social skills. Busywork to keep their minds off the awkwardness of being Boca Linda's youngest freshmen. Most kids just go home and procrastinate until dinnertime. Yours decided to do the actual assignment."

Mrs. Womack clears her throat. "Well, I don't like it. All Ernie does now is sit in front of his computer—"

"He did that before SuperMegaNet, honey," Mr. Womack interjects.

(One of the Kounicovas stifles a laugh.)

"—talking to goodness knows who and uploading to goodness knows where!"

"You always *did* want him to get out more. This is how they do it, kids these days."

Mrs. Taylor shakes her head. "And that's the problem. It's not like when we were their age. No one had the Internet back then. You had to physically go somewhere to get into trouble. If you were in your room, you were pretty much in the clear. Kids today have the world at their fingertips. There are stories on the news all the time about creeps and perverts lurking in chat rooms—now they're actual *rooms*."

Mr. and Mrs. Kounicova converse quietly in Czech for a moment while Mrs. Womack tries unsuccessfully to interpret what they're saying.

Meanwhile, Mr. Womack is shaking his head and waving his hand in the air. "This is no different than having a front door in your house. There's a big, bad world out there. Chances are if your kid is looking for trouble, he can find it within fifty paces of the doormat."

"My daughter keeps her computer in her bedroom," Mrs. Taylor says. "The

front door, as it were, is no longer down the hall—it's beside her bed. And it's unlocked. With something like SuperMegaNet, she doesn't have to go looking for trouble anymore. Trouble comes looking for *her*."

"True," Mike says, "if she's carelessly added people she doesn't know to her buddy list. But if used responsibly, there's no reason SuperMegaNet can't be as safe as old-school chat, right?"

"As if teaching a child responsibility is as easy as flipping on a light switch," Mrs. Womack snorts.

"Are you saying," Mrs. Taylor asks Mike, "we should just let our kids continue to use SuperMegaNet whenever they please?"

"*Use* as opposed to *abuse*. That's key here." Mike shrugs, glances at me. "We believe in letting Theo make his own *educated* decisions. Right, honey?"

I smile, I nod...and yet, no matter how much of a proper example I want to set for the other parents, I just can't get the image out of my head of Theo sitting beside me on the guest sofa, tears streaking his face as he rasps those three terrible words: "I'm blind, Mom." He tries so hard to be my perfect little man, but I should know better. Just because he handles his Web design business with such maturity doesn't mean he's not still twelve years old. Oh, lord, I let him have too much too soon, and it's cost him his eyesight. What kind of a mother am I?

I can feel a tear trickling down my cheek. Luckily there's so much cigarette smoke clouding the air that no one notices as I dab at my face, straighten in my seat. Besides, all eyes are on Mike (bless him for diverting everyone's attention) and Mrs. Womack, both of whom are going at it.

"No, I *get* what you're saying, Mr. Ivanovich," Womack snarls. "You want us to sit back and twiddle our thumbs, romanticizing childhood and watching as our kids transport—"

"*Upload*," Mr. Womack corrects.

"—into the waiting hands of child molesters, terrorist groups, political candidates!"

"Give your grandson a little credit," Mike says. "Don't you think he's savvy enough to say no to a strange man in a van offering a lollipop and a ride to Chuck E. Cheese's house?"

"No!"

By now, Thrailkill is nothing more than a vaguely human figure leaning forward behind a veil of smoke as she stubs out her cigarette, exhales, lights another. "It's obvious you've overestimated the deviousness of your precocious little offspring. Your darlings have acquired the ability to transport themselves instantly around the world, and so far they've proved themselves too afraid or too stupid to find their way beyond our city limits. They went through all the trouble of finding and installing SuperMegaNet to keep in touch when they live not more than ten minutes away from each other." She leans back in her chair; all I can make out are her shadow and the lit end of her cigarette. "They can go anywhere in the world, and yet they've made friends right *here*. I think it's safe to say they've missed the point."

"That's it?" Mrs. Womack barks. "That's your advice on the matter?"

"Yeah," Mrs. Taylor adds (with less intensity). "What kind of a counselor are you?"

Thrailkill's answer is a puff of smoke exhaled with well-practiced patience.

"I've had enough." Mrs. Womack slaps Mr. Womack on the shoulder, signaling that it's time to go. She stands up, slowly, ominously, and with a distinctly theatrical flair. Indeed, a spotlight now shines down from above, illuminating her frame as she rotates slowly in place, aims an accusing index finger at each of us in turn. "Mark my words: SuperMegaNet is evil, and must be purged from our children's lives!" She allows a moment for her words to sink in. Then the spotlight fades, and normalcy is restored to her visage. "Good day to you all."

She exits the room, dragging Mr. Womack along by the shirtsleeve.

Mike and I file out into the hallway along with everyone else, coughing and shaking the cigarette smoke out of our clothes (it doesn't do much good). I wouldn't be surprised if the time spent sitting in Thrailkill's office has taken a few years off my life—but at least it wasn't for nothing. Mrs. Womack, in her exaggerated, overblown way, is right: SuperMegaNet is trouble, and I need to wean Theo off it. I need to meddle—

—I need to *mother*.

# From the Passenger Seat of My Mom's Lexus

**@eva**

My mom's driving me home from wrestling practice, and I know from the instant she says, "So..." that I'm in some kind of trouble. Of course, a single word by itself isn't indicative of how an entire sentence will turn out. She could be about to ask me how school was, how practice went—but it's the *way* she says "so" that's tipped me off. Long, drawn-out, italicized. *So...*

"So...?" I echo, carefully resisting the urge to squirm in my seat.

"I met the other parents today," Mom says.

Of course, she can only be talking about a specific set of parents—but I play dumb anyway because that's how you do it. The less you say, the less can be used against you. "What other parents?"

"Theo's mom and dad. Mr. and Mrs. Womack. The Kounicovas."

Huh. *Womack*. I'll have to remember to call Ernie that if and when I ever see him again. "That's nice. Did you all go out to lunch or something?"

"No, we had a little parent-counselor meeting. The topic: SuperMegaNet."

Oh. That.

"What were you thinking, Eva? Networking with a bunch of boys you don't even know? Uploading to their bedrooms? Letting them upload to *yours*?"

"Mom, it was a school assignment. Mrs. Thrailkill—"

"Yes, I met dear old Mrs. Thrailkill. Which reminds me: I don't want you setting foot in her office ever again."

"Mom—"

"I'm serious. She smokes in there. And her idea of *counseling* leaves much to be desired."

We stop at a red light. Awkwardness prompts us to keep our eyes on the passing cars—as if we're watching the procession at a Macy's Day Parade. Only we're not.

"It's no big deal," I say after the light's turned green again.

"Of course it is," Mom says. "Second-hand smoke is more carcinogenic than what the actual smoker is inhaling."

"I was talking about SuperMegaNet."

"As far as that goes," Mom says, pretending not to miss a beat, "they're *boys*. You're a girl. Or don't you remember that little talk we had about how these things work?"

Yeah, yeah. Boys and girls, the sperm and the egg, cause and effect, ball and chain. "If you knew them you'd know that they're totally not, um, *those* kinds of

boys. They're...weird. Theo designs Web sites and listens to Asia; Ernie spends all his time eating and farting; Jan..." I bite my lip. "All he cares about is lifting weights and speaking with an unintelligible accent."

"Mm-hm. But it's an entirely different story once their hormones kick in. One day you're just friends, the next they'll want, they'll *expect* privileges."

I sigh. "It doesn't matter. I stopped using SuperMegaNet last week anyway."

Turning onto our street, Mom asks, "Oh? Why's that?"

Because I wasn't comfortable letting myself spy on a nearly-naked boy in his sleep. Because it's not the boys' hormones I'm worried about, it's my own. Because I have no reason to talk to Jan ever again. "I don't have time, what with homework and wrestling practice."

Mom seems to relax somewhat—most likely the result of endorphins being released by what she's about to say next: "Regardless, I want your computer out of your bedroom and in a box in the garage by dinnertime."

"*What?*" I exclaim. "Why?"

"Because you're twelve, Eva, and I don't like the idea of people using your bedroom as an Internet lobby."

"Besides my classmates at Boca Linda, I only added Summer, Lily, and a few of the other girls at Toepoint to my buddy list—"

"That's not the point."

"What *is* the point?"

"Would you like me to upgrade you to an all-around grounding?"

Ugh! "No, ma'am."

"Good."

Good? Hardly! Totally unfair is more like it! "How long do I have to stay off the computer?"

"Until I decide it's safe to go back on."

"But I told you, the only people on my buddy list are..." I trail off, noticing the way the vein on the side of Mom's neck is starting to throb.

The negotiations have failed.

We pull into our driveway. Mom shuts off the engine. "Okay. Your dad will be home any minute. Not a word of this to him, understand?"

As if the first thing I'm going to do is blurt out to Dad that I've been doing "naughty" things online. As if Dad would have a heart attack or simply *implode* on hearing such news. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now get cleaned up for dinner."

"Yes, ma'am."

I get out of the car and trudge up the driveway, making a show of dragging my backpack and gym bag behind me. I unlock the front door; my first instinct is to dash down the hall and into my bedroom so that I can warn Theo and the others. Not that they care—not that *I* should care. Jan hates me; Ernie's fat and obnoxious and always calls me Bug Eyes; Theo...well, I guess I don't have anything against him. Maybe I'll send him a quick instant message—if there's time.

# The Only Real-World Example in Which Vangelis' Mythodea is Totally Appropriate Background Music

**@theo**

I'm never going to get used to bedtime. Not like this, not with my special contact lenses out for the night and my sightless hamster eyes blinking into the vast nothingness. Before the whole New Eyes fiasco, night used to be dark—but not *this* dark. It makes me think how ridiculous it is, how some kids are afraid of the dark when they've never really been in darkness. There's usually a digital alarm clock somewhere in the room, the standby LED of a DVD player, television set, or game console, or light from the street lamps outside filtering through the window. That's not true darkness, that's just *dark*.

Darkness is lying wide awake in bed and wondering...what if there's a fire, or any earthquake, or a tornado? Would I have time to jam my lenses in before I'm burned to a crisp, crushed like a paper cup, or blown right out the window?

A creepy whisper coming from the direction of my desk distracts me from my thoughts: "Wake up, Theo."

I sit up. It sounds like Mini-Theo's found his way out of the closet. Annoyed—but glad for the diversion—I fumble for my lenses. I can hear the first bombastic notes of "Movement 1" off of Vangelis' *Mythodea* blaring from my PC's speakers. Quickly, I pop my contacts in and look over to where Mini-Theo has climbed onto my desk and is working the mouse with both hands. He looks at me for a moment, then points solemnly at the screen.

"Come...witness the end," he says in a horrendous backwards whisper.

I get out of bed (I've recently switched places with Beta, reclaiming my bed and relegating his gear to a corner of my desk), pad over to the desk. On the computer screen, Ernie's SuperMegaNet window has been maximized, allowing for a crystal-clear view of what can only be described as a visual cacophony. Mrs. Goodale has taken on an otherworldly form. She's now eight feet tall, clawed, and bearing a gigantic pair of wings, and is moving through Ernie's bedroom with tidal force. "Movement 1" scores her motions: a cymbal crashes in time with the swing of her arm as she knocks a shelf's worth of PlayStation games into an oversized plastic garbage bag; the choir chants almost demonically as she moves over to the closet, ripping the door from its hinges and uttering a series of nonsensical screechings when a barrage of Twinkie cartons, M&M's packets, and honey bun boxes comes tumbling out onto the shag carpet.

Behind her, Ernie, his hair mussed, his face bruised and bloodied—oh, wait, it's

only chocolate syrup—is screaming and flailing his arms and trying to get past her, to save what he can before it ends up in the garbage bag—to no avail. Mrs. Goodale has become a rigid hunk of remorseless, middle-aged grandma, impervious to assault, verbal or physical.

This is confirmed when Ernie, out of desperation, grabs his bedside lamp and hurls it at her. The lamp base shatters, the light bulb exploding, the lampshade fragmenting into a thousand pointy shards. Ernie covers his face with his arms and wails miserably as Mrs. Goodale lumbers toward his computer, her outstretched claws reaching for the webcam—

—a chat window pops up the in the middle of my screen. Eva's sent me an instant message:

**evaluscious:** OUR PARENTS ARE ONTO US.

Ernie's window goes black.

Huh.

So *that's* what's going on.

## Not-So-Great Expectations

**@becky**

I'm watching the tail end of Mrs. Womack's infiltration of Ernie's bedroom, and I'm thinking to myself, this is wholesome. This is good. That fat turd spends so much of his time absorbed in himself—*his* food, *his* video games, *his* porn—it's about time he was knocked down a notch!

I can't believe I've been supporting his gross habits since the beginning of the school year. You know what he told me? He said that some perv named Robbie had kidnapped him and force-fed him honey buns for two weeks straight, and that's why he has an eating problem: because Robbie likes to fatten his little boys before, er, going steady with them or whatever. What a dumbass I am. I felt so sorry for Ernie. I thought he was telling the truth, I thought I was helping him get through his trauma when I brought over the junk food. It turns out I've just been giving him free calories. He was never kidnapped by anyone, and he doesn't care about me or my feelings. He just cares that I show up every few days with a new care package. Twinkies, Nutty Bars, Pirate's Booty—*those* are his real friends. I'm just a convenient set of arms to shovel them into his gaping mouth.

I'm fat. I know it, as do the other kids at my school, and they frequently let me know that they know. As if I've never in a million years stood in front of a mirror and realized the futility of trying to squeeze into a pair of hip-huggers. I know that no boy will ever want to be with me for my looks. But it would be nice to be *wanted* in some way, to be...desired.

Ernie jokes that I'm too needy. "You take things too seriously," he always says, usually after seeing my reaction to his calling me "Piglet" or "Fatness." He thinks he's being affectionate, or that I'm so totally cool with obesity that I don't mind being called "fat" to my face. But I wouldn't mind a lie or two once in a while. Something like, "You look beautiful today." Or, "Theo asked to trade girlfriends, but I told him to bite me. Why should I get the short end of the stick?"

I *wanted* Charlie Brobeck, that cute skater boy with the beautiful hair who's in my P.E. class. One of the few benefits of being fat is that when we run laps, I do more walking than running. I'm always behind Charlie, chugging, panting, exhausted, ready to pass out, but somehow able to keep my legs moving so that I'm never too far back to appreciate his perfect form, his wild, unbridled locks doing a slow-motion dance in the breeze. I could run the mile behind him forever. But he doesn't like fat chicks. And the only class we have together is P.E. So, to him I'm just the greasy, sweaty, blubbery girl who's always out of breath. He's never seen me

in my non-sweat-stained form.

I used to cry over it. All through sixth grade I tried to work up the courage to talk to him, to get out at least a few good words before exploding violently in front of him, leaving steaming, gooey bits of me all over his face, his clothes. Every time the end-of-day bell rang, I ran home in tears because I'd let another day slip by without making contact, without at least *trying* to snag him before some other girl did.

This year, I thought I might actually do it. I was practicing lines in my head to and from school. I was constructing backup conversations just in case there were any awkward silences. I was ready to "accidentally" bump into him. Then I heard he got caught making out with Katie Sigler behind the bleachers during lunchtime, and I knew it was over. He has a taste for lean meat now. I figured he'd eventually get suckered in by some cute and super-thin pixie, but *Katie Sigler*? She's a slut! She used to sell kisses during recess! Making out with her is what boys do when they've exhausted all other possibilities—or when they simply don't care who gets them to first base.

That's why I settled for Ernie—and I do mean I *settled*. He's fat, obnoxious, single-minded—but he never made it with Katie. I can guarantee you he's never had a girlfriend before. I thought I could use the novelty to my advantage. Even though I knew better, I got with him. He was *my* Katie. The easy chick, the path of least resistance. I thought that maybe being with a girl would inspire him to chew with his mouth closed, or to make an effort to hold in his farts when he's around other people. But no. He acts like a fourth-grader, which is ironic, considering he's a high school honors student. (I have the feeling that someone somewhere made a paperwork error, because I've never seen him do his homework. Not once! How does someone like that get skipped ahead?)

I suppose it's all for the better. If he doesn't have the attention span to manage his academics, there's little chance he could ever maintain a diet of any kind. No, he'll never be more than what he is now: a pathetic, dateless butterball. I don't need him. I can lose weight on my own, and when I do, when I'm thin and beautiful and all the boys want to go out with me, I'll make sure I stop by Ernie's for old times' sake, just to let him see what he let slip right through his hands. Revenge is a bitch named Becky Bensonbutter. Remember that, Ernie.

I watch his SMN feed on my computer screen. The video of his bedroom bounces upside down as his webcam is dragged out into the hall by a still-screeching Mrs. Womack. He's dropped to his knees and is now fishing remnant M&M's from the shag carpet.

All right. Enough for today.

I reach beside my mouse pad, picking up the small Mrs. Womack-shaped paper doll I made earlier. I remove the claws and pull off the wings; I speak the sacred words. On Ernie's end, the screeching dissipates, replaced with more traditional yelling and shouting.

His grandmother has been restored to normal.

# The Day I Lost Respect for My Parents

**@jan**

Wow. I've never seen anyone's grandmother turn into a winged beast before. That was totally and completely...wow. I now understand the source of Ernie's crude, crass behavior: the pressure of living in the lair of a shape-shifting *babička* has driven him partially insane—

The front door opens, closes.

Mom and Dad are home.

I'd been staring, mesmerized, at Ernie's video feed on my computer screen, but now I quickly minimize all my SuperMegaNet windows and resume my homework, watching my parents peripherally. They whisper something to each other. Then Mom disappears into the kitchen, and Dad crosses the living room, steps into my nook, folds his arms.

I pretend to be so absorbed in my bookwork that I don't notice him.

He raps on the desktop. "Jan."

I look up. "Hi, Dad."

"Have you been using your computer to upload to other people's houses?" he asks, displeased.

Uh oh. He *knows*. "Houses?"

"Yes. Houses, homes, structures in which your friends reside."

I hate lying to Dad, partly because it's *lying*, but mostly because I know I'm dead meatballs if he finds out I've been doing something I shouldn't. So, I try a diffuse answer first (just so you know, it's not a lie, it's a non-denial denial): "With our Internet connection? That would take *forever*. DXL Pro guarantees between 1.5 and 3 megs per second, and we get *exactly* 1.5."

Dad stares me down, waiting, the wrinkle between his eyebrows deepening.

In the kitchen, Mom starts slicing carrots. Loudly.

"Oh, yes," Dad says with his eyes. "Your mother's only a holler away. And you *know* how she likes to handle these kinds of things."

Swift and severe. I know.

*Chop-chop.*

"Well," I say, "I let my friends, um, download here once or twice, and I may have tried uploading, er, once or twice too—but it was only so that we could work on an assignment for school."

Dad nods. "I *thought* it was odd, that time your computer was left running with you nowhere to be found, pillows stuffed under your blanket."

"I never used it to do anything bad," I say, hanging my head.

"It's enough that you felt you had to hide it from me and your mother."

"I wasn't *hiding* it. It just...never came up."

"It's a chat program that lets you transport yourself between computers," Dad says. "You'd think something as amazing as that would come up during the many times I've asked, 'How was your day?' I mean, we're not just talking MP3s and Jay Pigs here."

"JPEGs," I say, correcting him.

Dad steps back, points at the hallway leading into the bedroom. "I want your computer—the tower, monitor, keyboard, and mouse—unplugged and in my room."

"Why?"

"You know why."

Because he's afraid I'll try uploading into a bank vault or something? "How will I do my homework?"

"There's an old Czech technique called 'pencil and paper.' It's from way back, when there weren't any computers, when apples were eaten and windows were scrubbed. Now, get moving."

"Yes, sir."

I shut down my PC, then crawl underneath the desk, moving my dumbbells out of the way so that I can reach the power strip. I'm upset with Dad. Not so much because he's grounding me off of SuperMegaNet (like I keep telling Ernie, we all live in the same city—we can visit each other without it), but because he doesn't trust me. He's lumping me into a category with the kinds of kids you hear about on the news, the ones who say "yes" to strangers. I'm mad at him for that, I'm mad at Ernie for insisting we all install SuperMegaNet in the first place—I'm mad at myself for going along with it.

I lug the computer into my parents' room. Dad nods approvingly and tells me to go study quietly until dinner is ready.

I go back out into the living room and sit on my bed with my back against the wall, my schoolbooks spread out beside me. My desk looks so barren without the computer on it. I can see the spots where the faux-wood laminate is peeling off the pressboard. The monitor had also served as a makeshift partition between my nook and the rest of the room. Now I can see across the hall and right into the bathroom. Lucky me.

A few minutes pass, during which I try to focus on my schoolwork while Mom bangs away in the kitchen (she was the loudest cook in Brno, and now she's the loudest in San Angelico). It doesn't help that Dad has started puttering about in the bedroom, moving things, plugging something haphazardly into the wall outlet —my PC, I realize with a pang.

My PC with its sizable collection of retro bikini beach babe pics stored conspicuously in a folder labeled "Retro Bikini Beach Babe Pics."

I hear the welcome screen chime. Dad's set up my PC, turned it on, and is no doubt poking through my files, looking for trouble. *Ježiši*, if he stumbles on that

folder I'll just die. Or maybe it's worse than that. Maybe he's going to reformat the entire hard drive as part of my punishment. No more retro bikini beach babes at all.

I lie down and roll onto my side, facing the wall.

This is bad. This is really bad.

After a while, I hear Dad come out of the bedroom and go into the kitchen, where he murmurs something to Mom. I'm assuming she follows him back into the bedroom, because I don't hear anymore pots and pans clinking, and it smells like whatever she'd been cooking has started to burn.

I continue to stare at the wall. Mom and Dad come and go several times without mentioning my bikini babes—without speaking to me at all, actually—once, to take care of whatever's burning on the stove, and then again to fetch something (beer, it sounds like) from the refrigerator. Back in their room, they start talking loudly. No, they're *laughing*. And telling jokes. And getting pretty rowdy about it, too. And it sounds like there's a third person in the room with them.

I sit upright, eyes wide. I'm sure I didn't hear anyone come through the front door. That means...but no. My parents wouldn't—they *couldn't* be using SuperMegaNet, could they?

Tiptoeing into the hall, I press my ear up against the bedroom door. I still can't understand a word being said, but I'm sure now: there's a man laughing and joking with Mom and Dad, and unless he climbed in through the window, there's no way he could've gotten in without being downloaded.

It's hard to concentrate on my homework after that. I can't help wondering what my parents are up to. Nine o'clock rolls around, and dinner still isn't on the table. On the one hand, my bikini babes and I seem to have been forgotten. On the other, well, I seem to have been forgotten.

At nine-thirty, I clear off the bed, lie down and close my eyes. I'm not really tired, but there's nothing else to do at the moment, and I don't feel like lifting weights or watching TV. Without meaning to, I drift off to sleep, waking partially at regular intervals throughout the night to random bursts of laughter, whiffs of cigar smoke, beer, and cold cuts as several more of my parents' friends download. This continues until dawn lightens the room. Usually my mom wakes me, but this morning I end up waking myself, ten minutes later than usual, which means I'll have to walk that much faster to school.

By now I'm absolutely famished. I make my way into the kitchen—and stop dead in my tracks when I see my uncle Martin sitting there at the table, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Ah, rise and shine!" Martin exclaims, getting to his feet and stepping toward me with arms outstretched. "Look at you!" He grabs me by the shoulders, rattles me as if checking for loose teeth. "Little Jan, not so little anymore!"

"Little Jan." That's what they used to call me back in Brno. Little Jan, a diminutive form of my dad's name—even though I'm as tall as he is.

"I didn't know you were visiting," I tell Martin.

"Neither did I! But your dad, he showed me a computer program. What do you call it? SuperMegaNet?"

"Yes," I say, frowning.

"I uploaded straight from Brno. Your father's going to show me the store today. Oh, it's *good* to see you again, Little Jan!" He ruffles my hair and beams ear to ear.

Huh.

"Well, I have to get ready for school," I say, and go back into the living room. Dad passes me on his way into the kitchen. I give him a suspect look, but he ignores me, starts talking to Martin about this or that.

A moment later, I hear the bedroom door open. The sound of half a dozen people conversing in Czech follows my Mom out into the living room. She's carrying a stack of dirty plates and empty beer bottles.

"Oh, good morning, Jan," she says to me. "Time to get ready for school." She moves on into the kitchen.

I grab a change of clothes and head into the bathroom. I'm almost finished with my shower when the unthinkable happens: one of the half-dozen people visiting my parents barges in and avails himself of the toilet. It's only after he's had a powerful bowel movement that he acknowledges my presence with an embarrassed apology. Then he flushes, washes his hands, and leaves the bathroom door wide open on his way out. Which means I have to pretend I'm not sopping wet and extremely disconcerted as I step out of the tub, quickly walk over to the door, and slam it shut. This *has* to be some kind of psychological punishment for installing SuperMegaNet without my parents' permission, some overblown example of what can supposedly go wrong when you blindly let people download into your home. What other explanation is there?

I dry off; I deodorize, throw on my clothes, mess with my hair a little bit, brush my teeth. Back in the kitchen, breakfast is nowhere to be found. All the bread and cold cuts have been eaten, and there's trash on the table, dirty dishes in the sink... and it occurs to me that something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. What if this *isn't* my parents' way of teaching me a lesson by setting a bad example? What if they've tried SuperMegaNet for themselves and have somehow become hooked, grounding me off the computer so that they can have it all to themselves?

My stomach grumbles. I know I'm not the talkative type, but now more than ever, I wish Theo and Eva weren't trying so hard to keep away. I wish we could all have lunch together at our usual table. We should be there for each other. Instead? Eva's sworn off the rest of us; Theo's going through some kind of reclusive phase; Ernie's probably going to be in a coma for the next few weeks after what his grandmother did to his bedroom. SuperMegaNet was supposed to have brought us together, but instead it's driven us apart, turned my parents into strangers.

## SuperMegaApp

**@eva**

Being the only girl on the wrestling team has never really bothered me. Friends and family like to make a big deal over girls playing boys' sports, as if it's inappropriate, or dangerous, or "just not done!"—but let me tell you, I can handle any boy who steps in my way just fine. I may not have height, weight, or bulging biceps, but I *do* have technique. *I'm* fine; it's the *audiences* who can't handle it. I hear them in the stands during competitions, cheering or politely jeering when a boy goes down, sucking in their breath or moaning critically when it's my turn to eat mat. There's always that clueless spectator who shouts, "Ease up! She's just a girl for Christ's sake!"

(Yeah, I'm just a girl *and* I'm younger than everyone else. Thanks for rubbing it in!)

I suppose that's why I'm the only one on the team who actually likes Coach Coffee. Well, as much as anyone can like a ranting, raving lunatic who refers to his boys as "ladies" on a good day, "maggots" when things are going kind of bad. He treats me with the same disrespect as everyone else during practice—he doesn't baby me. He gives me three minutes to duck into the girls' locker room and change out of my street clothes. Then he makes me and the guys jog around the inside of the gym until we feel like puking. Then he makes us hit the weight room for conditioning. *Then* he marches us back out into the gym and has us pair off to work on our drills for the rest of the evening.

Tonight, Mrs. Thrailkill stands near the exit and puffs coolly on a cigarette as she witnesses the proceedings. We're sharing the gym with the volleyball team, so I can't tell if she's ogling us or them.

My usual practice partner is this wispy freshman with the longest arms and the largest Adam's Apple I've ever seen. Everyone calls him Gangles. I have no clue what his real name is, or if he even has one. I kind of resent him, one, because he looks at me like I'm a small child, frail and vulnerable, two, because Coffee thinks the only suitable partner for me is an anorexic, and three, because he likes to shoot his mouth off.

Usually I can take it in stride, but today I'm just not in the mood for restraint, what with my mom deciding I'm too helpless and too fragile to use my own computer. As soon as Coffee blows his whistle, I tackle the crud out of Gangles.

His headgear pops off and topples across the mat.

The other boys stop what they're doing and look in my direction as I get up

and walk off the mat for a drink of water.

"What's with her?" one of them asks.

"Must be on her period," replies another.

I throw my water bottle onto the floor. The spray from the impact douses my face, soaks my hair. I whirl around in place, fire blazing from my eyes and causing the moisture above my eyebrows to sizzle. "*Who said that?*"

Someone stifles a giggle; several pairs of musclebound shoulders slouch guiltily.

Coach Coffee smiles at me, pleased. "Save it for next week's match, Taylor."

We work on our moves until six-thirty, at which point Coffee tells us that we stink and to hit the showers. The volleyball team is still practicing, so I get the girls' locker room all to myself, which is kind of nice.

At six forty-five, Mom calls to tell me she's going to be late in picking me up. To pass the time, I sit at the top of the bleachers, using my backpack and my gym bag as a makeshift pillow, and watch the volleyball girls do their thing.

Once, when he'd first realized that I was an honors student, Gangles had sat with me so that I could help him with his math homework. It had been kind of flattering having someone actually pay attention to me for a change. Inevitably, though, his friends had reminded him that hanging with the little bug-eyed girl was incredibly lame. He hasn't asked me to help him with his homework since.

I wait a few minutes, toy with my phone, watch as Rigo, one of the hunkier wrestlers, exits the boys' locker room, approaches the bleachers, starts climbing in my direction.

"Hey, Eva," he says when he reaches where I'm sitting.

"Hey," I say back, carefully hiding my delight at his acknowledging my existence.

"Waiting for your mom to pick you up?"

"Yeah. She's a little late tonight."

Rigo nods, smiles, fumbles with something in his pocket. "Mine, too. I've got some time to kill, so...do you think you can do me a favor?"

"Uh...what kind of favor?"

He pulls out his iPhone. "I need you to hold my phone for a few minutes."

Oh. "Sure, I guess so."

"Cool. I'm going to, uh...have you ever heard of SuperMegaNet?"

"Of course."

"Then you know how it works." Rigo looks relieved. "Isn't it the coolest?"

"It's pretty neat," I agree.

"It freaking *rocks*—though we're not allowed to use it on campus. A couple of idiot sophomores got caught downloading someone's pit bull into the school library."

I seem to remember hearing something about that during the morning announcements. "Is that why they roped off the stacks?"

"Mm-hm. Principal Sandalwood sent in an animal control officer after several freshmen didn't return from a book report, but he—the animal control guy, that is—was never heard from again. The freshmen are presumed dead."

Wow. Who knew a school library could be so...morbid?

"But anyway, here." Rigo hands me his phone. "Go ahead and upload me, and just keep an eye out for Coffee, or Sandalwood, or anyone else who smells of faculty, you know?"

"Fine."

Rigo smiles again—and pats me on the head as he would an obedient pup. "Thanks, Eva. You're the greatest."

I smile politely and send him off to wherever it is he'd rather spend his time waiting for his mother to pick him up (a booth in some burger joint, judging by the video feed). Then I set his phone down beside me, on the bench. I used to think I had a crush on him—but not anymore. Now I know better. He's sixteen and gorgeous; I'm twelve and flat-chested. Of *course* I have zero chance of him considering me as anything more than a convenient holster for his dumb iPhone.

FML.

I glance around the gym. Coffee's over by the exit, and is bumming a smoke off of Thrill-Kill; the volleyball coach is busy trying to get one of her girls to serve correctly. Assured that no one's paying me any mind, I pull out my phone and bring up the app store. Sure enough, there's a SuperMegaNet app available.

I know what you're thinking. I swore off SuperMegaNet, so why should it matter that there's a SuperMegaNet phone app? Well, it doesn't. I don't care about SMN. But I *do* care about getting back at my mom for grounding me.

I install the app. Momentarily, when SMN commandeers the screen, I log on, scroll through my buddy list. Out of habit, I peek at Ernie's video feed, which is black and flecked with the swirling, translucent ghosts of morbid-looking honey bun boxes. Theo's feed shows an empty bedroom; Jan's shows his parents and several of their friends sitting together at a rickety card table and playing poker.

It would seem everyone else (besides Jan's parents) is doing a better job of keeping off SMN than I am.

I scroll down some more. Summer's feed pops into view.

"Hey, babe," she says, smiling and waving when she sees that I'm online. "What's up?"

"Waiting to be picked up from practice," I say. "How about you?"

Summer rolls her eyes, tilts her webcam to show that she's lying sprawled out on the floor of her gym. "I'm doing after-practice cleanup. Mind if I drop in?"

"Misery loves company," I say.

Summer shimmers into existence beside me, starts to reach over for a hug, but stops suddenly, making a face.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She frowns, pulls Rigo's phone out from underneath her bottom. "Whose is this?"

Woops. Forgot about that. "His name's Rigo. I'm, er, holding it for him."

"Correction: my butt crack was holding it for him." She swipes her finger across the touchscreen, starts poking through Rigo's files. "Is he cute?"

I grab the phone from her. "Oh, my God, that's so rude!"

"Whatever." She leans back, looks around the gym, fixes the volleyball players with a disapproving stare. "So, this is your new school, huh?"

I shrug. "For better or for worse."

"Could be worse, but could also be a lot better—wait, no laptop?" Summer pays my backpack and gym bag an inquisitive glance. "How'd you download me?"

I hold up my phone.

Her eyes widen. "You mean there's an SMN app? Cool!"

"Rigo told me about it. And it's a good thing, too, because my mom grounded me off my computer last night."

"Ouch. Why'd she do that?"

"She found out I was using SuperMegaNet behind her back."

"Really? She doesn't like you using SMN?"

"My mom's not as liberal as yours."

"You must be pretty fed up with her."

I sigh. "I'm fed up with *myself*, actually."

"Oh?"

"I shouldn't even care about SuperMegaNet anymore. I swore off it last week, and I've never looked back. But now that I'm not *allowed* to upload to my friends' houses, suddenly they're all I can think about."

Summer narrows her eyes. "Now, when you say 'friends,' who exactly are you talking about?"

"Theo and Ernie...and Jan, I guess."

"Babe, you didn't need to swear off SMN, you just needed to swear off *them*."

"This is serious," I say. "I think...I think I actually *miss* them, and I don't even know why."

"It's the new school," Summer says assuredly, "and the fact that everybody here is older than you. They've all got cars, jobs, boyfriends or girlfriends, and no time for you. So, of course you're going to feel more comfortable hanging around people your own age—even if they *are* Theo, Ernie, and Jan. But that doesn't mean they're the *right* people to hang out with."

I watch one of the more homely girls struggle to make a serve. Her thighs wobble like Jell-O in her shorts. "I know, I know. You tell me that every time we talk. But I can't help it. I don't want to be around them anymore, and yet I can't stand *not* being around them."

"Okay, then," Summer says. "You wanted Jan, right?"

"Yeah. Past tense."

"You wanted Jan, and so you made friends with his friends as an in, an excuse to be around him. You never really *liked* Theo or Ernie. And when Jan made that whole big deal over not liking you, it suddenly didn't matter anymore whether or not you were getting along with the others because they no longer served your purpose."

"That's *so* shallow, Summer."

"*That's* the truth. It's how these things work. You're new at this, so you're having a little trouble putting things into perspective, that's all. The realist inside

you knows it and wants to move on, but the sweet little girl in you can't stand the possibility of hurt feelings along the way."

I want to tell her that she's wrong, but instead I just clam up, pretending to watch Jell-O Thighs Girl again. I wonder: if Jan hadn't been sitting there alongside Theo and Ernie the day we met inside Thrill-Kill's office...would I have talked to either of them a moment longer than was necessary to complete that stupid socializing assignment? Other than Ernie's fatness and Theo's incessant worrying, I don't have anything against either of them. I just can't think of a reason we should be friends. I can't think of a reason I should think of a reason we should be friends, either.

"It's not like that at all," I tell Summer, ignoring a pang of guilt.

She sighs, wraps her arm around my shoulders. "Babe, I can hear it in your voice. You're beating yourself up over not caring for people you'll probably never see again, people you were never meant to meet in the first place."

"That's silly. You either meet someone or you don't. Destiny has nothing to do with it."

"Let me put it another way..."

Uh-oh. She's going to mention the cheerleading team again, I can just tell—

"...as a member of the cheerleading team, I have visibility. Gobs of people have seen me from the stands or on TV. I get friend requests all the time. They friend me on Facebook, follow me on Twitter. They post on my timeline or reply to my tweets as if they're my friends, but I can never truly know these people. They're *fans*, not friends, Eva."

"This is different."

"Whether it's me handling my fans or you handling a bunch of oddball boys who think they're on your level, the concept is the same. *You* have to be the affirmative one. You have to make the choices. Otherwise you're just going to be led along by their shenanigans. You'll tolerate them simply because you're afraid of going the next four years without making any real friends."

I think about that for a moment. Down below, Jell-O Thighs Girl is huffing and puffing, trying to keep up with her teammates. I wonder if she's squeezed herself into those shorts simply because she's afraid of graduating high school without having been on any teams.

"You're only a year older than I am," I say. "How can you be so sure about all this relationship stuff—and how can you be so sure that Theo, Ernie, and Jan are wrong for me?"

Summer squeezes my shoulder. "Babe, I just want to make sure that you're sure. Look, I don't think they're right for you. But if you do, if you're friends with them because you want to be and not because you think you *need* to be, then, well, I can't stop you. Now, enough of the deep stuff. You never told me whether this Rigo character is hot or not."

I sort of nod and shake my head at the same time. "He's totally hot."

"Big muscles?"

"Huge."

"There's nothing better than a muscly guy."

"Before you get your hopes up, you should know we're not friends or anything. I'm just holding his phone."

Summer looks disappointed...and a little annoyed. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Hmf. Give me that thing."

"Why?"

"I want to help you set things right."

Whipping off her flip-flops, Summer snatches Rigo's phone and descends the bleachers with expert dexterity, darts across the floor, past the volleyball players and into the girls' locker room. She emerges a moment later—without the phone—and, throwing in several cartwheels and handsprings along the way for good measure, bounds back up to where I am.

"Why'd you do that?" I demand as she sits beside me once again.

She shrugs. "Who am I to look the other way when an opportunity presents itself?"

I glare at her. "But I promised I'd hold it for him. Now I'm going to look like a jerk—"

"Babe, if I'd let you hold onto his phone all polite and proper you'd be holding his phone for him *every* day. Let him learn the hard way that you're not going to be his footstool."

Down below, the volleyball coach blows her whistle and tells her girls to hit the showers. I still think it's messed up, sabotaging Rigo's phone as such, but the timing is impeccable, and I have to admit the look on his face when he comes stumbling out of the girl's locker room trailing a flurry of high-pitched screams behind him is priceless.

Summer and I bow our heads together and cackle fiendishly.

# In the Closet

**@mini-theo**

It's been a month since Theo banished me to the closet. That may not seem like a long time to you; your limited perceptive state has probably convinced you that I'm just a talking plush doll with nothing but plastic beans where his heart and soul should be. But let me tell you, plush doll or not, it's cruel and unusual punishment to be kept locked away in a dark compartment where the only way to pass the time is to imagine new and exciting methods of implementing CSS floats.

In case you just tuned in, here's what's going on: Theo's pretending I don't exist. He's pretending he doesn't need me—*me*, his competitive drive, his social dexterity, his eight-inch-tall pocket warrior! How ridiculous is that? He might as well cut off an arm or leg. Without me, his adolescence will be mere formality, an obligatory bridge between childhood and adulthood. Bland and boring.

Try telling *him* that, though.

I can hear footsteps approaching. I crouch, peering through the crack underneath the closet door. Theo walks into the bedroom, sets his backpack and gym bag on the floor, goes over to his desk and wakes his computer so that he can check his e-mail like a good little geek.

I start banging my mitts against the door. "Theo! *Theo!*"

He flinches, pauses for a moment, then resumes working the mouse, carefully concealing the fact that he's become aware of me.

I bang some more. "I know you know I'm in here! I know you can hear me! This has gone on long enough! Let me out!"

A click of the mouse, the tapping of a few keys, continued ignorance.

"I'm no good to you stuck in here! Have you ever heard of 'use it or lose it?' If you keep this up, you're *definitely* going to lose it!"

Still nothing.

"You're only proving my point by sitting there slumped in front of that stupid PC, just like you've done every day for the last month, burning time, wasting your youth, passing up a golden opportunity! I mean, you could be grounded right now. Any other parents would have gone nuclear if they found out their kid had gotten New Eyes from someone they met online. What do *your* parents do? They give you a New Age scolding: free reign, renewed trust, undying *love*. And what do you do with the privilege? You hole yourself up in this...this Zen monastery and code Web sites all afternoon. You do *homework*, you read *manga*, you listen to *Asia*—oh, wait, that's right, you get out. Yeah, you go to that gym everyday after school with

your mom, sweat yourself silly on some smelly, sticky treadmill or whatever it is you do to get those fabulous guns you insist on hiding under all those oversized shirts."

Theo sighs, leaves his desk, goes over to his dresser for a change of clothes.

"Keep it up," I say, exchanging reverse psychology for sarcasm. "Keep ignoring me like you ignore Ernie, Eva, and Jan. We're only holding you back!"

Theo leaves the room without saying anything.

What a douche.

I straighten, sitting with my back against the door, clenching and unclenching my tiny fists (no easy task, mind you, considering that I don't have proper joints). I'm tense, my mind feels clogged—and it's only going to get worse if Theo keeps this self-deprivation stuff up. He's weaned himself off his friends, he's replaced playtime with work; he won't even masturbate because some pompous, misguided yogi somewhere along the line mentioned that too much yanking drains your *qi*. That's too *much*, not too *little*. Too little and...well, you have to clear the dust out of your vacuum bag every so often, right? Otherwise it's just going to burst at the seams, spewing foul-smelling particulates all over the place. And I swear to God Theo is about to burst.

We'll talk more about his vacuum bag later. Right now we need to focus on the overall. We need to stop being so passive and start being more assertive. I've heard that boy on his cell phone with the idiot who "manages" Asia Afrodesia: "Change this on her Web site. Add that. No, put that back the way it was. Now do this—wait, no, do *that*. Yes, I'll send your check out at the end of the month. Along with last month's check, yes, yes." You get the point. Theo needs to tell this manager fellow to STFU, to remind him, "I'm the webmaster. Let me handle the Web design duties while you handle Asia's various drug deals and court settlements." He needs to *step up* (just not to me).

After a few minutes, he comes back into the room, fully dressed, his hair still wet from the shower. He closes the door quickly, but not before I get an earful of the voices wafting up from the dining room.

"Who's over?" I ask, crouching beside the closet crack once again. "Is it Mr. Megalomoto?" Even upstairs, down the hall, and through two closed doors, I can hear his loud, obnoxious laughter bouncing off the walls. "It's Mr. Megalomoto, isn't it?"

Theo stands in front of the dresser, applies deodorant, checks his reflection in the mirror (needlessly) for facial blemishes, runs a brush through his hair. "Yeah," he says, unenthusiastically.

"Dude, you don't have to go through this alone. Let me out and we can tag team him together. I'm here for you."

Theo snorts. "The last time you were 'here for me' I lost my eyesight. And before that I made Eva cry by intentionally giving Jan bad advice."

"Come on. She would've cried anyway once she realized Jan really, *really* doesn't like her in a kissy-feely way. But that's a matter for another discussion. Right now we're talking about you."

"What *about* me?"

"You're incomplete."

"How's that?"

"Remember that episode of *Star Trek* where a transporter accident split Captain Kirk's psyche into two physical bodies?"

"Yeah."

"You're lame Kirk. I'm party Kirk."

"Party Kirk," Theo points out, "got drunk and almost raped Yeoman Rand. And he wore women's makeup."

"Only because Yeoman Rand tore up his face."

"The point is, party Kirk was dangerous. He wasn't meant to exist—"

"On his *own* he wasn't—"

"Just like you're not meant to exist."

"Of *course* I'm meant to exist! Why else would your pubertal brain have spawned me—"

"I don't like the things I do when you're around. I don't like the, ah...ideas I get. I don't like losing my temper. I don't like betraying my friends. And I *hate* not being able to concentrate on my schoolwork because I'm too busy thinking about —"

"Breasts?"

Theo swallows hard. I can't quite see his face from this angle, but I'm sure it's bright red.

"No," he says.

I laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You're such a lousy liar."

"I'm not lying—"

"Just now, at the mere *mention* of boobs, your wang reared its head and went, 'Huh?'"

"Shut up."

I start to point out that an affinity for boobage is the first sign of life he's shown all month, but at that moment Beta appears in the room, totally spoiling the mood even though he's dressed like Slash, and is holding a guitar.

"What's this I hear about boobs?" he asks.

Theo sighs. "Not now, Beta."

"Maybe we can reach a compromise," I say, silently cursing Beta for his timing. "We'll start tonight, after dinner. A photo of Amy Farrah Fowler, some hand lotion—"

"For crying out loud!" Theo swears under his breath, and starts out of the room.

"Hey, where are you going, little dude?" Beta asks.

"What do you care?"

"I care!" I yell. "*I* care, Theo!"

The bedroom door opens, then slams shut.

I hammer my fists against the closet door some more (as if it'll do any good at this point). "That's right! Don't mind us stuffed dolls and disembodied SuperMegaNet users! You just get on downstairs and stuff your face before the rice noodles get cold! I'm sure you'll have a blast watching Megalomoto hit on your mom while your dad kisses his rump!"

Out in the hall, I can hear Theo descending the staircase.

Beta walks over to the closet and opens the door. He looks down at me with an expression that's only half dumbfounded as I jump to my feet and dart out into the bedroom shouting, "Free at last! *Free at last!*"

"Um, not to pry or anything," Beta asks after I've finished doing an impromptu victory dance, "but what exactly is going on here?"

"It's our first *pon farr*," I reply, "and geek boy's being a total jerk about it." I toddle over to Beta and hug one of his ankles. "But thanks to your daring rescue, that's all about to change!"

## Regarding Theo's Spunk

**@beta**

Huh. Look at that. There's some kind of miniature, motorized Theo doll running around the bedroom, yipping and tossing cartwheels across the floor as he knocks over furniture and strews dirty laundry all over the place.

"You know," I say, "the little dude's a neat freak. He's not going to like what you're doing to his room."

"It's his own darned fault!" the doll screams, yanking the power cord of Theo's Wii from the wall. "He's kept me locked up all this time, he's tried to keep me from expressing myself—but I *will* find expression!"

Excellent audio reproduction. It sounds just like Theo, but smaller.

The doll continues on his rampage until every inch of Zen has been buried beneath a layer of rumpled clothes, ruffled manga, and opened CD jewel cases. I'm hesitant to intervene, not only because I'm trying to give Theo his space after the whole New Eyes thing, but because it's actually kind of mesmerizing to watch. That is, until the doll lunges for my laptop and hard drives—at which point I grab him by the scruff of the neck and toss him aside. He hits the floor with a soft thud.

"Hey!" he grunts, recovering, jumping to his feet and dusting himself off. "What gives?"

I fold my arms, step protectively in front of my gear. "Whatever you've got going on between you and Theo, that's your business. But don't you go messing with *my* stuff. Got that?"

The Theo doll blinks, scowls at me, runs over to where he's dropped a pillow, and rips the tag off. Then he collapses onto the floor, arms and legs splayed. He looks both annoyed and satisfied at the same time.

I sit cross-legged beside him and survey the carnage. "Sorry for roughing you up, but that laptop is my only home. You break it and you end up breaking *me*."

The Theo doll grunts. "You don't seem all that surprised to see me."

"I'm a disembodied programmer living entirely in cyberspace as a means of escaping the rigors of multiple sclerosis. I make it a point to keep an open mind."

The doll grunts again.

"So, are you some kind of mechanized puppet?"

"*Puppet*? Ha! I'm a *physical manifestation* of Theo's subconscious, his ego, his competitive edge, his spunk."

"Oh. I didn't realize he, er, had any of that."

"Of *course* he does. All guys get their spunk once they hit twelve or thirteen.

Theo may be trying his darnedest to hide his beneath the oversized T-shirts and unassuming, nerd-boy demeanor, but he's got it, which means he secretly craves the same thing every other pubescent boy craves."

"Which is?"

"To command and conquer! To kill something with his bare hands! To have at some poor unsuspecting swimsuit model until there's nothing left but a shredded bikini laying crumpled in a steaming, putrid pile!"

"TMI, dude."

"It's the truth. Tell me I'm wrong."

I think for a moment. "Well, maybe you're not *wrong*. But you're kind of exaggerating."

"Am I?" The Theo doll sits up, gives me a grave look. "You know what happens when you suppress your spunk?"

I shrug. "Bad headache?"

"You end up like Peter fricking Pan, wearing green tights and living in a fantasy land where you play with wooden swords all day because you're too *clueless* to realize that Tinkerbell wants to tinker your bell. Or Michael Jackson! Poor guy had an umbrella fetish and thought he was a kid till he was fifty years old, God rest! Theo's halfway there. He sits in front of the *computer* all day, he does yoga with his *mom*, he drinks *green tea*, he listens to *Asia*—he's trying to act like some super-intelligent, super-spiritual guru! Meanwhile, his spunk goes untapped. Well, I won't stand idly by and watch that happen. I've got to *do* something about the situation. Somehow I've got to get the gang back together before it's too late."

Stupid question, but... "Theo's in a gang?"

The Theo doll rolls his eyes. "Not a *gang*-gang. I'm talking about his new friends. Ernie, Eva, Jan." He snorts. "At first I thought Ernie would be the one to pull Theo's head out of his rear, what with his gas giant ability to draw others into orbit around him. I assumed *he'd* be the driving force that kept everyone together, but now that's changed. Everyone's on restriction—Theo's the only one who can still upload or download. He may be the crux of the whole thing and he doesn't even know it."

"Dude," I say, shaking my head. "Just what are we talking about here?"

"The certain specific chain of events that will ultimately lead to the ripening of Theo's spunk!"

"Again, TMI—"

"If all you're going to do is ask idiotic questions and spout clichéd abbreviations..." The Theo doll waves his hand dismissively at me, gets up and toddles toward the bedroom door. "Give me bus fare."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"For a ride."

# Riding Public Transit for Plush Dummies®

**@mini-theo**

Unbelievable. We're living in the digital age, an age of cell phones, wireless Internet, HDTV, SuperMegaNet, and here I am riding the *bus* like it's 1982 because the gang's gone AWOL, because Beta can't drive (well, he probably can, but he's afraid of being hassled by the feds, or by a gang of rogue programmers from one of Taurus Labs' competitors, or by human rights activists looking to string him up as an example of the dangers of modern-day technology)—because little Theo's growing up and getting his spunk, and he's being a total jerk about it. Or *not* being a jerk, as the case may be. And here I am, perched precariously on a smelly, slightly moist seat inside this moving purgatory on wheels as it ambles in the general direction of Ernie's neighborhood. Because if I don't do anything about Theo's spunk, no one will.

You may be wondering how a walking, talking, preadolescent plush doll made it out of the bedroom, down the street, and onto a public bus without being confiscated by some random brat or tossed into a lost and found box. Allow me to explain. It's simple, really: utter astonishment. See, the general population is a hopelessly complicated mess of bumbling idiots stumbling over one another on the way to and from the office, the supermarket, the DMV. It functions because everyone is too beside themselves to do anything whenever something extraordinary happens. Watch any of Roland Emmerich's doomsday movies and you'll get it. When someone sees an uprooted tree tumbling toward them do they stop and stare dumbly, or do they turn and run? The former, of course. That's utter astonishment. That's them thinking, "I don't believe it!" or, "This can't be!" when clearly something can *be* without you believing in it. Someone gets his wallet lifted in an alleyway, and he doesn't go running after the thief; he merely stands there dumbfounded and yells the obvious to passersby: "He took my wallet!" Thieves are aware of this social flaw and exploit it on a daily basis.

The flaw's what keeps people who see me from doing anything *about* me. They don't believe in me. They assume my toddling is a trick of the light. Anything I say is disregarded as a misfiring of the ol' eardrum. And so I have leeway as long as I don't exceed the threshold by drawing undue attention to myself. That means no flirting, no picking fights, no interpretive dancing.

But enough about all that. The nuts and bolts of my existence within the societal paradigm are unimportant. I need to focus on the job at hand: reinstating Theo's spunk.

I know what you're thinking. He's only twelve, he doesn't need to be thinking about killing and girls and world conquest, and my obsession with his *lack* of obsession regarding the subject will only serve to rob him of what's left of his childhood, his *innocence*, right? Well, you couldn't be more wrong. I'm not instigating anything here. Theo was *already* considering adolescent mischief and mayhem when I came onto the scene. That's why—consciously or subconsciously—he personified me: as an outlet, a means of self-expression, an exploratory aide. He's nipple-high in his own juices, and he needs to learn how to swim before the current pulls him under, before he goes and gets himself caught up in something worse than New Eyes.

Take a look at the nerdy college kid sitting across from me. As careful as he's been to make it look like he's engrossed in a copy of *Megatokyo, Vol. 6*, he's not really reading at all. Nor is there any sound coming from his earbuds. No, see his eyes? See how he keeps looking over at that leggy blond in the tight-fitting T-shirt? He's reading her, listening to her—he's hanging on her every word as she jabbers cheerfully on her cell phone. Not in any kind of creepy stalker/rapist way. Rapists smile and stare you down with that twisted look that says, *Oh, yeah. I'm going to have you*. Nerd Boy here just wants the privilege of being in the same room as T-shirt Girl for any length of time, maybe share a table at Starbucks and talk *Big Bang Theory* or C++ programming with her as a more realistic alternative to dropping to his knees and begging for permission to spend a couple of days buried alive between her fabulous thighs. He wants her more than anything in the world—but he'll never have her, because he doesn't have the spunk to speak up. He probably rides the bus with her to and from the university every day; he can probably tell you what her favorite Coldplay song is, what classes she's taking, what she likes to put on her frozen yogurt. And yet he probably doesn't even know her name.

How do I know this? I've seen the same look on Theo's face a thousand times since the start of the school year. To illustrate, why don't I replace Nerd Boy with a six-years-from-now version of Theo—

*Pop!* Nerd Boy disappears, replaced by an older, taller, ganglier version of Theo.

—and a six-years-from-now version of Eva.

*Pop!* T-shirt Girl gets swapped out with an older, bustier, leggier, less bug-eyed version of Eva.

Now do you see what kind of trouble Theo's in? Look at him: eighteen, thick-framed glasses (for effect, as I'm well aware he doesn't need them anymore), oversized "Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman, Howe" T-shirt, unintentionally baggy jeans, bare feet in flip-flops. Shudder.

Eva, on the other hand, has blossomed, grown some gentle curves, developed some adult-onset confidence. She's become *teh hotness*.

The two of them sit shoulder to shoulder. Theo's pretending to be occupied with *Megatokyo* and his iPod, flipping pages and scrolling through his playlist with ADD-like intensity; Eva simply stares straight ahead, looking bored and sexy, waiting it out.

After a while, her cell phone rings.

Answering it: "Hi, Summer. Yeah, I just got out of class. Heading home. Weekend plans? Hm...studying, laundry, church. How about you? Uh-huh. Tonight? Let me see..." She nudges Theo in the ribs. "Hey. Summer's having a clothing-optional slumber party tonight. It's girls-only, but she says you can come if you bring your Wii."

Theo's eyes very literally bulge out of their sockets, and he drops his iPod. It slides across the floor, disappearing under one of the seats toward the rear of the bus.

"Oh, I don't know," he says, swallowing, wiping a sudden sheen of sweat from his brow. "I've got homework, and a couple of Web sites to work on—"

"If you don't want to go, just say so."

"No, really, I'm all about getting naked and playing Wii Fit with you and the girls all night...but, well, duty calls. You know?"

Eva looks disappointed and starts talking to Summer again as Theo leaves his seat, gets down on all fours, and crawls down the aisle, searching for his iPod and muttering an embarrassed "excuse me" whenever he bumps into someone's feet. By the time he finds it and returns to his seat, Eva's gotten off at her stop.

Theo stuffs his earbuds back into his ears, and is once again jogging blissfully through his playlist when a middle-aged guy sitting a few seats over very casually moves into the seat beside him, leans over, and slaps him across the forehead.

"Ow!" Theo exclaims, his iPod tumbling out of his hands and down the aisle again. "What was that for?"

"Come *on*!" the middle-aged guy exclaims. "Friday night? Naked slumber party with your sexy girlfriend? And you want to stay home doing *homework*?"

"Girlfriend?" Theo blinks, clueless—then he smiles, laughs nervously. "Oh, you mean the girl who was sitting next to me? Naw, we're just friends."

Narrowing his eyes, the older dude slaps Theo again. "I can see why."

"Ouch! What was *that* for?"

"The 'Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman, Howe' T-shirt. That and the fact that you've blown it again."

Theo massages his forehead and looks genuinely confused. "What do you mean?"

"You're not fooling anybody!"

"I don't understand—"

"Junior, you've been riding this line for two years, morning and night—so have I—and the way you stare at that girl you'd think she was the proverbial siren."

Theo blushes.

"Most guys look at a girl like that for long enough and they figure out a way to get her. *You*, why, you just pretend you're her sister."

"I don't pretend I'm her...just because we aren't...what's wrong with just being friends?"

"It's not healthy."

"Who says that just because she's a girl and I'm a guy that she has to be my girlfriend and I her boyfriend?"

"Who says you *don't*?"

Theo sighs. "We're really good friends. I wouldn't want to spoil it."

"It may spoil things, it may not. That's not the point. The point is that you won't even try."

"Again, who says I have to?"

"You do! Everything you say, everything you do revolves around that girl. Look, if you were gay, or truly disinterested it wouldn't be an issue. But you *want* to be more than just friends."

Theo gathers his things, stands up. "Okay, um, thanks for the advice, but I'm going to stand for the rest of the trip."

The middle-aged dude shakes his head. "No one ever fixed a problem by running away from it. Remember that when you're home alone waiting for Netflix to cue up."

Theo ignores him. On his way to the front of the bus, his cell phone rings. He answers it. "Hi, Mom. No, I'm not doing anything tonight. Bingo? Sure, I'll swing by the dollar store on the way in and pick up some magic markers..."

*Pop!*

To hell with that temporal nightmare. It's made me sick to my stomach. But it doesn't have to happen.

I won't *let* it happen.

# Old Paperback Smell

**@mini-theo**

So, this is where Ernie lives. I've never seen the place from the outside (and have only felt it from inside Ernie's room, thanks to the New Eyes fiasco). Not that there's much to see. The Goodales live in your typical suburbial environment: all the compact, single-story houses are variations on a cookie-cutter theme, right down to the obligatory yard gnomes standing watch over cost-effective concrete lawns.

I toddle up to the front door. I knock. After a moment, Ernie's grandmother—in human form, thank goodness—answers, frowning, looking up twice, down twice, left, then right, then left again, then right again—her own inadvertent rendition of the Konami Code, I realize. On the bus ride over, I'd been preparing a variety of stranger-danger techniques to get me into Casa Goodale, but I don't think any of that will be necessary. Ernie's grandmother is looking too hard to see me, perhaps because of my perceptive probability qualities, or perhaps because she simply doesn't have her glasses on. Either way, I take advantage of the situation, quickly darting between her legs and into the house.

"Listen up!" she shouts at a nonexistent gaggle of punk teenagers. "If I ever find out which one of you crazy kids keeps ringing my doorbell and running away I'll chase you down and clobber you myself! In fact..."

I glance over my shoulder. Mrs. Goodale has stepped outside, and is now rapidly erecting a seven-story scaffolding made of crooked girders and ladders. Nearby, a small pile of barrels has appeared out of nowhere.

Wow.

I face forward once again, making my way past the parlor, down the hall, and into the living room. There's a faded sofa, two fragile-looking rocking chairs, a pair of rickety end tables (both smothered in flowery doilies), and a large glass display showcasing a collection of plates, statuettes, and figurines. No TV. The place looks like an antique shop—and I start to get it, I start to get what Ernie's all about. Everything here's old and brittle and boring. It even *smells* old. Like when you open a paperback that was printed in 1987. Everything here has begun to yellow at the edges. Growing up in such an environment would drive *anyone* to Internet porn and excessive eating the first chance they got.

At the far end of the living room is the entrance to another hallway, this one giving access to the bedrooms and bathroom. Through the process of elimination, I find Ernie's door. I bang on it a couple of times, and Ernie eventually answers.

He's wearing a stuffy-looking sweater over a collared shirt, khakis, and his hair is nicely combed. He looks like he just got back from Harvard...or a golf tournament. He's no longer the same Ernie whom Theo was forced to meet on the first day of school—he's an unreasonable facsimile thereof.

We share a moment of mutual bewilderment.

Then I find my voice: "What the fuh happened to *you*?"

# Spunk-Related Illness

**@mini-theo**

"I'm on restriction," Ernie says, letting me in and closing the door. "My computer's been impounded. There's a lock on the fridge. Grams picks out my clothes each and every morning. *That's* what the fuh's happened to me."

I glance around the bedroom. Mrs. Goodale's mutant tirade attack has left the place a barren wasteland. Where once there were posters on the walls, there are now only dust outlines, remnants of Scotch tape; the shag carpeting is intact, but is wilted, like a once-mighty lawn of grass that's gone for too long between waterings; the desk...well, let's just say the 1970s called, and they want their pre-Commodore era panel desk back.

Ernie coughs loudly, clears his throat. He sounds like he's catching a cold. "So... am I having a hunger hallucination or something?"

"Probably," I say. "But that's a good thing at the moment. It's left you more open to the state of perceptive flux in which I exist."

Ernie snorts, sits at the edge of his neatly-made bed, and coughs some more. "You sound just like Brainiac. Like nerd, like doll, I guess."

I frown, watching him wipe his mouth on the back of his hand. "Are you always this phlegmy?"

"*Blech*. I think one of the lunch ladies peed in my food. I'm coming down with something. And also going insane."

"You're not going insane. See, I'm Theo's psychic apparatus in physical form, and I'm quite real. And I need your help."

"With what?"

"I need you to help me rescue Theo's spunk."

Ernie wrinkles his nose. "His *spunk*?"

"Yes."

"Like, his splooge? His baby juice? His rich, potent—"

I hold up my hand, cutting him off. "Spare me the adjectives, leviathan. We're not talking biology here. Well, we kind of are, but it's more important than that. What you're talking about is just a biological manifestation of the procreative essence. Spunk is the overall that powers that pure essence, your heart and soul. Without his spunk, Theo will grow up shooting blanks, emotionally, socially, romantically. You need to help me help him get back in the game. We need to get him back on SuperMegaNet, meeting people, exchanging favorites lists, uploading to house parties—"

"Wait a minute," Ernie says. "I thought Theo said he wants to stop using SMN because it makes him go all Sam Winchester, sans the demon blood."

"Sam Winchester?"

"The whiny younger brother from *Supernatural*."

"You watch that show?"

"Eff yeah I do. Well, I *did* before my TV got taken away."

I smirk. "No offense, but *Supernatural* is kind of a chick show, isn't it?"

"Um, wrong! It's about a pair of kick-butt demon hunters—"

"Who look like Calvin Klein models."

Ernie narrows his eyes at me. "Theo's a neat freak. By extension, you of all people should appreciate a couple of guys combing their hair and brushing their teeth more than once a week."

"Oh, I do. But that doesn't change the fact that a *real* hunter would be all grizzled and leathery, with an eye patch, or a wooden leg—someone like Mickey Rourke in *Sin City*."

"Sure, if you're a lousy hunter. A *good* hunter would know better than to let some random monster-of-the-week get close enough to hack off his leg."

"I disagree. That's like saying a carpenter can have soft, un-calloused hands and still be a good carpenter. Dean and Sam aren't good hunters. They're merely hunters who look good."

"They'd kick your butt if they saw you."

I frown, an ominous thought suddenly occurring to me. "You're not on Team Edward or anything, are you?"

Ernie jabs his finger at me. "*Twilight* is relevant. *Relevant!*"

"Fine. Whatever. Are you going to help me?"

"I don't know." Ernie sighs, slowly and carefully lying on his side. "Even if I knew something about other dudes' spunk—and I definitely *don't*—why's it so important for *me* to be the one to do it? Why not Jan or Eva?"

"Because Theo's closer to you than he is to the others."

"Bunk."

"No, really. He'd never admit it, but you're like a brother to him."

"Wang fat."

"Think about it. Jan's merely a classmate with a funny accent; Eva's just some girl who's too good for him. But you, you're his *friend*."

"Double wang fat. He told me so the night after he went blind and I ate his apology pizza. He said that we were never meant to be friends, that if it hadn't been for SMN we never would've kept in touch after meeting in Thrill-Kill's office—despite the fact that we live in the same town and go to the same school."

"He didn't mean that. He was upset, confused."

"Yeah, well, judging by the desolation you see before you, he was right." Ernie closes his eyes. "We used SuperMegaNet behind our parents' backs, and it's ruined our lives."

"What's *with* you, dude?" I ask, toddling over to him. "Just last week the most important thing in the world to you was 'defending the pact.'"

"Last week my food and porn collection wasn't locked inside an impenetrable safe."

I'm about to stomp my plush foot on the floor and demand that Ernie stop putting food and porn before his friends when a vicious revelation sucker-punches me right in the gut:

Ernie's lost his spunk.

He's lost his spunk and it's making him physically sick.

I gawk at him, not wanting to believe it's true.

Feeling my stare, Ernie opens one of his eyes a crack. "What?" he wheezes.

"You've lost your spunk," I murmur.

"Load," Ernie says, scowling—or, rather, wincing.

"No, it's true—don't you see? Theo's merely suppressing his spunk, but you've had yours *taken away*. It's like...it's like your grandparents are withholding your daily protein, calcium, and vitamin C." I climb up onto the bed; I lean against Ernie's cheek, gently stroking his forehead. "It's killing you."

In response, Ernie shifts his head so that he's facing me. He opens his mouth as if to say something—and sneezes on me. A long, viscous rope of green snot shoots out of his nose and splatters against my torso in horrific slow-motion.

"*Ugh*," he groans, wiping his nose and rolling onto his side facing away from me. "I don't feel so good. I need to rest up for dinner. Tonight we're having steamed brussel sprouts. Take a hike, little talking hallucination doll."

Well. This is super. Ernie's eating brussel sprouts, I'm soaked in fowl-smelling mucus, and not only do I have to save Theo's spunk—

—it would seem I have to save Ernie's as well.

## Theo Likes Me?

**@eva**

I'm lying sprawled on my bed, muscles aching from wrestling practice, brain reeling from too much schoolwork, when I hear Theo calling to me:

"Eva, we need to talk."

*Totally* disturbing—for three reasons: one, I'm not expecting visitors; two, I didn't see the door open; three, since it's almost bedtime, I'm in my jammies.

Doing this sort of improvised, awkward back roll, I shift into a defensive crouch. "Theo? What are you...?" I pause, glancing down at the floor. The cutest little plush Theo doll has just squeezed its way through the crack beneath the door, and is now toddling toward my bed. "What the...?"

The doll shakes its head, waves its arms. "No time for a Q and A. Theo and Ernie are in trouble."

"Okay..." I reply, slowly, uncertainly, half-amused as my brain jumps to the nearest conclusion. I know my birthday's coming up at the end of the month; my parents are aware of my affinity for dolls, and, for some reason, have decided to gift me early with, er, a motorized doll. Of Theo.

"You're a doll," I say, "and you're talking."

"You're a *gurl*, and you wrestle," the doll shoots back.

I narrow my eyes, getting out of bed and cautiously padding over to where the Theo doll's standing. I sit after a moment, reaching toward it. "Do you mind?"

The doll shakes its head, and I pick it up with both hands, poking, squeezing, feeling for batteries.

"Oh, baby," the doll sighs. "You don't know how long Theo's been waiting for you to feel him up like that. I'm Mini, by the way."

I frown, quickly removing my finger from between the doll's legs. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Really? You don't know?"

I shake my head.

Mini shakes his head harder. "He likes you."

I let Mini go, setting him back onto the floor and folding my arms. "He does *not* like me."

"Babe, he stares at you like you're a steak dinner with all the trimmings."

"Theo's a vegetarian—he doesn't eat meat."

"Well, he'd totally go double cheeseburger and fries for you."

"Right—the same day I win a million-dollar jackpot."

"No, really. Remember the New Eyes thing? That was all for you."

"Whatever."

"Mm-hm. He thought that by getting rid of his glasses he'd stand a better chance against Jan at, er, hacking your GirlSpace page, so to speak."

"You're making this up."

"You don't even know! You've been too busy fantasizing over the impossibility of ever handling Jan's honey buns to notice that all along Theo's worshiped and adored you."

"I thought he was being *attentive*, sure, but I..." Huh. Now that I think about it, Theo *does* tend to look a little dazed whenever he's around me. I always assumed it was because he was the shy, introverted type—now I don't know what to think. I mean, Theo's nice and all, but he's not the kind of boy you really, er, *want*. If you know what I mean. Glasses or not, he just looks like someone's little brother. And at times he can be a little—a *lot*—smart-alecky. Not like Jan. Jan who hates me, but Jan whose bulging biceps and darling accent make me want to play hooky and snuggle with him all day. I try to imagine Theo snuggling with me, and it just seems like...babysitting.

Ew, ew, *ew*. "That's gross, Mini. Why are you telling me this? I thought you came here because Ernie and Theo are in some kind of trouble?"

Mini nods. "Theo's got a bad case of denial, and Ernie's dying."

"Oh, please," I say, rolling my eyes. "Whatever Ernie's doing, he's not dying. He's...exaggerating."

"This is different. He's really, really sick."

"He probably just ate too many Sara Lee cheesecakes at dinnertime—why am I having a conversation with a plush doll?"

"Because you're bored!" Mini insists. "Your mom and dad have locked you down so that between school and wrestling you only have a measly hour to yourself at the end of each day. You'd jump at the chance to fill that hour with something meaningful. Make this hour matter, Eva. Come with me—you'll be sticking it to your parents and saving someone's life in the process."

Okay, that's creepy. This doll shaped like a miniature Theo just confirmed one of my deepest, most carefully-hidden secrets, something no one but Mom could possibly know. "How did you...?"

Mini shrugs. "I'm a terrific judge of character. So's Theo, by the way. You should talk to him sometime, confide in him, share a bubble bath..." He trails off, catching the Evil Eye I send hurtling his way. "Uh...too soon?"

I shake my head. "Are you some sort of programmable spybot? Did Dad buy you to check on me? Make sure I'm being a good little girl?"

"Look," Mini says, lifting his shirt, dropping his pants, and standing spread-eagle. "No cameras, no mics. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

I sigh, getting to my feet. I've had enough. "I'm obviously suffering some kind of psychotic breakdown. I'm going to bed. But first..." I reach down and pick up Mini. I carry him over to the window; I open it and toss him through.

He lands on the grass with a soft thud.

## There's a first time for everything...except this.

**@mini-theo**

And on down the societal totem we go.

Despite having been tossed through a window and left for dead on Eva's lawn, the soldier in me is determined to keep on keeping on. A little after nine o'clock, the bus deposits me on the corner of Main and La Veta. From there it's a four or five block toddle to Jan's apartment, which is in a lower-middle-class neighborhood comprised of single-story, well-kept houses sandwiched between a chain of fast food joints and the freeway. Ernie's always ratting on Jan for being poor, but I'm thinking this actually doesn't look at all like the crumbling, crime-infested poverty zone Theo had imagined—that is, until I reach the Kounicovas' apartment complex, with its faded fudge exterior, three-quarters-dead lawn, and high-voltage power lines running directly overhead. The whole place looks like someone dropped a gigantic trailer into a muddy lot, and then it rained and the trailer took root and started growing more trailers over time. At some point, the cable company must have done a hurried splice job, because there's a low-hanging cable running from the main line to the side of Jan's building; it's tied off on the end of an overhanging wood beam like a length of rope for a tire swing. If I was looking at a *Highlights* "What's Wrong?" picture, this would *totally* be the item that doesn't belong. The building's owner must get routine death threats from neighboring homeowners furious over their plummeting property values. I mean, this is the physical manifestation of a real estate black hole.

I cross the event horizon, ascend and descend the waterlogged modesty mound in front of the Kounicovas' door. There's no doorbell, but as luck would have it, I don't need one: momentarily, Jan, sporting his usual scruffy tank top and jeans combo, steps out. He's hefting a pair of swollen garbage bags. It looks like I've caught him in the middle of his chores.

"Hey!" I yell, dodging out of the way when he almost steps on me. "Watch where you're going!"

Jan stops, looks left, right, up, and, finally, down.

I glare at him, continuing: "That's right! I've been riding the bus all day and I have grass stains on my butt! I don't need a split seam to add to the list, thank you very much!"

Jan raises an eyebrow; something in one of his garbage bags goes *glop!* "You're that doll Theo brings with him to school, aren't you?"

"You've heard of me?"

Jan shrugs. “Not many people I know carry dolls with them wherever they go.”

Huh. Ernie was delirious with fever; Eva’s into dolls...but Jan, well, it seems he can see me just because. Maybe it’s his foreign blood—maybe Czechs just see things differently.

“So...you’re not going to throw a disbelief tantrum?” I ask.

“I don’t think so.” Jan starts walking again, around the corner of the building and down a narrow alley, toward the dumpster.

I follow.

“I mean, if UFOs are real,” he continues, “then I guess talking dolls can be real, too.”

“You believe in UFOs?”

“Don’t you?”

“Of course not.”

“Funny,” Jan says, chuckling. “That’s like a ghost saying he doesn’t believe in other ghosts.” He reaches the dumpster, chucks the garbage bags inside, first one, then the other.

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter. What’s important now is that you wash your hands—preferably with some sort of antibacterial soap—and come with me.”

“Come with you where?”

“Ernie’s dying. Eva’s gone all girlie. Theo wants to suck face with her, but, ironically, he’s being too much of a jerk.”

Jan looks horrified—about Ernie’s impending death, I think, and not the sucking face thing (which is just as important!). “Ernie’s dying?”

“Well, maybe not *dying*,” I reply. “But he’s in some kind of anti-spunk-induced funk—possibly caused by food and porn withdrawal. I tried talking to him, but he won’t listen to a doll. He needs a good friend, someone who can *reach* him.”

“Er, wouldn’t that be Theo, then?”

“In another age, on another world.”

“But I thought between the four of us, Theo and Ernie were the closest.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes and meh. The two of them are like brothers: stubborn, pig-headed, impossible to work with. They need some kind of intervention. You.”

Jan sighs, glances down the alleyway. “I don’t know how helpful I can be. Ever since my parents became addicted to SuperMegaNet—”

“Your parents are SuperMegaAddicts?”

“—I’ve had my hands full. I like the guys—and Eva—I really do. But times are thick. I have to manage my priorities. I have enough time for school, homework, cooking, cleaning, and a few reps with my weight set before bedtime. But that’s it.” He starts back toward his parents’ apartment. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to steal twenty dollars from my mom’s purse so that I can buy groceries for the week.”

I chase him down, tugging on an unintentional tear in his jeans. “You’re turning your back on your friends!”

Jan spreads his arms wide. “What am I supposed to do? Drop everything? Forget about my family and run off with you?”

“Your family forgot about *you*.”

Jan slows, bites his lip. "I know. But two lefts don't make a right."

"I think you mean 'two *wrongs* don't make a right.' And before, when you mentioned that times were 'thick'—"

"*Můj bože*, you sound like Theo now."

I'm about to point out that duh, I'm part of Theo's conscience and so, naturally, I share many of his annoying tendencies when a rumbling and rattling knocks me off my feet. For a brief instant I'm positive the Big One has finally hit southern California, and is now in the process of shuffling us sun-loving, latte-drinking, 24 Hour Fitness members into the Pacific once and for all. But then I spot the source of the mini-quake: a fleet of tow-trucks has pulled up in front of Jan's apartment, bringing with it several dozen city public service goons wielding an assortment of hooks, chains, pulleys, and jacks—

—which they start fastening to the Kounicovas' building.

I clear my throat. "Jan?"

"Yeah?"

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say those city workers are about to tow your apartment."

"Naw, they're just...that's not..." He trails off, watching in bewilderment as several helmeted workers start jacking up the side of the building—at which point he sprints ahead of me, waving his arms in the air to get the city goons' attention. "*Pro Krista pána!* What are you doing? Stop!"

The head goon glances over his shoulder. "Eh?"

"You can't tow a building!" Jan shouts.

"We're city public service," the goon replies. "We can do whatever we want. Besides, you're clearly parked in a red zone." He points at the curb.

"But this is where I live!"

"I'm sure it's where a lot of people live. Regardless, we have our instructions."

Reaching where Jan and the goon are arguing, I bellow, "'Instructions?' Who in the world gives instructions to tow away an entire apartment building?"

The goon looks down at me, seeing me, not seeing me, mouthing "what the heck?" before addressing Jan once again: "Look, it's nothing personal. We're just doing our job."

"But my parents are still inside!" Jan says.

The goon shrugs, scribbles something on his clipboard, hands Jan a piece of paper. "Sorry, kid. If you want 'em, you'll have to come down to the impound lot to get 'em." Turning back to his cohorts: "All right, boys! Take it away!"

The trucks hoist their hooks, rev their engines, and start down the street, unearthing Jan's building from its foundation and dragging it behind. Across the way, several neighbors have stepped outside to witness the spectacle, and are standing with mouths agape, cell phones extended, camera lenses twinkling.

Satisfied with the job, the head goon nods at Jan, gives me another dose of WTF, and climbs into his car. He speeds away, leaving us to literally bite his dust.

"I don't believe it," Jan mutters, watching him go.

Neither do I.

Jan looks down at the paper. “It’s the address for the impound lot.”

I mean…what just happened?

“My apartment building’s been impounded.”

This is unreal.

“Aren’t you going to say something?”

Can plush dolls hallucinate? “I think I believe in UFOs.”

“Huh?”

I shrug. “If someone’s entire apartment building can be towed for being parked in a red zone, then I’m convinced little green men from Epsilon Eridani can and do visit excitable farmers in the deep south. But there *is* a silver lining here.”

“What’s that?” Jan asks, unenthusiastic.

I smile up at him. “I know the perfect place for you to crash tonight.”

# Kinder Chocolate

**@jan**

I'm sitting slightly apart from Mini on a bus bench in front of Carl's Jr. and trying very hard not to notice how good the food smells every time someone picks up their order from the drive-through window. The fact that I'm not dressed for the cold doesn't help.

"I thought you were from Brno," Mini says.

"I am," I reply, shivering.

"Isn't it cold there?"

"In the winter, yes."

"Shouldn't you be accustomed to the cold, then?"

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket. "Cold is cold. Just because I'm used to it doesn't mean I *like* it."

Mini looks at me with that same "I knew that" expression Theo gets whenever he asks an obvious question. After a moment: "*You* have a cell phone?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Oh. I just assumed...I mean, no offense, but I didn't think you could afford one."

In fact, I can't afford a cell phone. That's why this is a prepaid. That's why it took me two weeks of saving my lunch money to buy a cheap Tracfone from Wal-Mart. When my parents asked me where I'd gotten it from, I told them Theo bought it for me. When they insisted that I reimburse him, I took the money and bought more minutes. That's how you do it when you're poor and you don't want to resort to out and out theft. Like, ski mask and crowbar theft.

I try calling my parents. Neither of them answers. Maybe they've turned their phones off, or forgotten to charge them, or simply left them inside our apartment before uploading to another of their all-day poker parties at Uncle Martin's.

"Well?" Mini asks expectantly.

"They're not answering," I tell him.

"Call Theo, then."

I scroll down my contact list, highlighting Theo's number, hesitating. I know we're friends, but that doesn't make it any easier to admit to destitution.

Mini climbs onto my leg, tries to peek at my cell phone. "What's the matter? Ran out of minutes? Low battery? Don't tell me you don't have his number stored —"

"I have his number," I say, shooing Mini away. "It's just..."

"What?"

I sigh. "It's embarrassing, you know?"

Mini shakes his head. "Dude, now is *not* the time to be grappling with your pride."

"That's easy for you to say. Your nickname isn't 'The Poor Kid.'"

"Your only other option is to ask someone for bus fare."

"I'm *not* begging for change."

"Fine. *Ask* for it. *Borrow* it. But whatever you do, make it quick—the next bus gets here in five minutes."

I fret, looking up and down the sidewalk for prospective contributors, but there's no one else walking about—everyone's in their cars and headed home for the night. At least, on my side of the street. Across the way, next to the flower shop, a homeless man has just convinced someone to drop a dollar into a tattered hat resting at his feet. He thanks the guy, then looks over at me. He smiles and gets to his feet, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a giant magic marker, which he uses to draw an equally giant scoreboard on the wall of the vacant suite behind him. When he's done, the scoreboard reads:

ME: 1
YOU: 0

"What a jerk," Mini murmurs. "Come on, Jan. You can *totally* earn more than that threadbare circus clown in the next five minutes." He glances down the sidewalk; an attractive-looking woman has exited the nearby drug store and is walking our way. "Quick, take off your shirt and flex for the lady."

"I don't think she's going to give me money just for taking my shirt off."

"Wait till she sees those heaving pecs!"

"Mini, no."

"Well, at least offer to help her cross the street or something."

"She's perfectly able to cross the street on her own."

Mini goes quiet as the woman passes the bus stop. For a moment I think he's let the matter drop—that is, until I spot him toddling directly in front of her. Not expecting to cross paths with a doll, she trips, stumbles.

"Ma'am!" I shout, instinctively darting forward, catching her in mid-fall. Her momentum takes us both down onto the sidewalk where, for a brief but utterly embarrassing instant, I'm lying on top of her, my front pressed against her backside, my hand inadvertently (I swear!) wedged beneath one of her breasts. Worse, in the midst of my unplanned assault from behind, I drop my cell phone. It slides across the sidewalk and goes tumbling into the storm drain.

"Oh, my God!" screams the woman, beating at me with her elbows and fists as she wriggles free. "Help! Help!"

I quickly roll off her. "Ma'am, I'm sorry—"

"Creep!" she yells, getting to her feet, adjusting her skirt, her bra strap. She gives me the finger, then turns and stalks away.

"You big lug," Mini says.

I prop myself on all fours, gaze wistfully in the direction of the storm drain. "My phone..."

"When I threw myself in harm's way, I meant for you to help her regain her balance, not go for second base."

"Quiet. You've caused enough trouble." I pick myself up off the ground and glare at Mini as I take my seat on the bench once again.

Across the street, the homeless guy updates his scoreboard:

ME: 1
YOU: -1

Mini joins me on the bench. We sit together in silence and watch as the homeless guy makes ten dollars in five minutes, updating his scoreboard along the way. I'm considering finding a less-competitive bus stop to wait at when a Geo Metro with Oregon license plates pulls up on my side of the street. The window rolls down and a forty-ish guy wearing a Hawaiian shirt leans over from the driver's side, smiles at me.

"You need a ride?" he asks.

Hm. Geo Metro; unshaven stranger wearing a Hawaiian shirt; unsolicited offer for transportation—this is everything they warn you about in stranger danger class. But it's late, it's cold, and I'm hungry. My brain is absolutely willing to loosen the rules by providing me with plenty of positive hypotheticals. I start thinking about the statistics and whether or not I actually know anyone who's ever been kidnapped. Not that kidnappings don't happen all the time. It's just...cold. And late.

I look down at Mini, who shrugs and mouths, "It's your call."

Across the way, the homeless guy looks a little disappointed that I've got a ride.

That settles it.

I scoop Mini up and get into the car.

On settling into the passenger seat, I notice three things. One, the entire backseat is piled high with honey bun boxes and what look like camping supplies; two, Justin Bieber is playing on the stereo; three, a printout of Ernie's SuperMegaNet profile pic is taped to the dashboard.

Whew. *That's* a load over my shoulders. I pay Hawaiian Shirt Guy another glance, and though I don't recognize him, I assume he must be a relative of Ernie's —an uncle or something. That would explain the honey buns and total lack of fashion sense (though not necessarily the Justin Bieber thing). And maybe that's why he stopped to pick me up: he knows I'm a friend of Ernie's.

"So, where are you headed?" he asks, pulling away from the curb and easing into traffic.

I freeze up, realizing that I don't know exactly where Theo lives.

"San Joaquin," Mini offers, scooting off my lap and lowering himself onto the floor. "Take the twenty-two to the fifty-five to the five and get off at Buckaroo."

I look over at Hawaiian Shirt Guy; he's still waiting for me to answer.

"You'll have to do the talking," Mini says. "I don't think he can see or hear me." He disappears beneath the passenger seat.

I repeat Mini's directions.

Hawaiian Shirt Guy nods. "That's a good half hour drive. What are you doing all the way out here without a ride? I'm Rob, by the way."

Rob. Why does that sound familiar? "I, er, my ride canceled at the last minute."

"Well, lucky for you I pulled up when I did, huh?"

"Yes. Thank you." Rob...Rob. I don't know any Robs, but I feel like I should know *this* Rob somehow. I glance at him sideways.

He starts tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "So, how about that Justin Bieber? 'Your lips, my biggest weakness...'"

Mini tugs on my pant leg. He's crawled out from underneath the seat, and is holding something in his hands—a JCPenney kids' catalog.

I frown, using my foot to shove him back under the seat. I don't need to see that—I don't *want* to see that.

"You into movies?" Rob asks.

"Um...sure."

"Have you seen *Super 8*?"

"No."

"Great flick. I have the Ultimate Edition on Blu-ray. That Riley Griffiths is hilarious. Best thing since Jeff Cohen from *The Goonies*. Well, before he lost all that weight. I tell you, twelve to fourteen—that's the age to be."

Mini reappears, this time with what looks like a candy wrapper—

—it's Kinder Chocolate.

And blackjack. Geo Metro, Hawaiian shirt, the incessant talk of boy singers and overweight child actors, the piles of honey buns in the backseat, Ernie's profile pic, the irrefutable Kinder Chocolate—I now know why Rob is so familiar to me: this is Robbie, *Ernie's* Robbie, the pervert dude who used to supply him with junk food. *Milý Bože na nebesích*—

—I'm hitchhiking with Robbie the Friendly Pervert.

# Grand Theft Cell Phone

**@jan**

Mini darts back under the seat.

I start feeling around for him with my foot, suddenly worried that he might try to ditch me—even though he's just a plush doll and wouldn't be able to do much in the event of an unexpected perv-pounce.

*Muj bože*, why *did* I get into this car?

Oh, but I already know the answer: because it was cold. Because I had no bus fare. Because I thought that I'd be one of the lucky ones, that not every grown man wants to molest every boy he picks up off the street. Maybe Robbie just likes to watch—or maybe he's only into fat kids. No sick will toward any fat kids out there, but *please*, God, let him be into fat kids only.

"So," he says, offhandedly, "am I alone in thinking Dakota Fanning's appeal went to shiz after *War of the Worlds*?"

Compromise, then. Let him be into fat kids and Dakota Fanning only.

"But I guess them's the breaks, you know? Ever see what happened to that Dewey kid from *Malcolm in the Middle*? Grotesque."

Okay, it's settled: I'm officially nailed. I'm in it bad—and still my brain refuses to acknowledge the obvious. "Maybe it's mere coincidence," reads a small thought bubble that's just appeared beside my head. "Maybe he's a dad and the Bieber CD is his daughter's, the catalog his wife's. You don't know. And *if* he's into boys and girls and kiddie chocolate, well, look on the sunny side: there are worse things than riding in the passenger seat of a honey bun-stuffed Geo Metro that's being driven by a Hawaiian shirt-wearing pervert who once masturbated at the foot of Ernie's bed...aren't there? Falling down a well and discovering that you've used up all your cell phone minutes, for example. Or contracting leprosy from a toilet seat."

I shake my head.

The thought bubble vanishes.

I look out the window and wonder how seriously I'd be injured if I throw myself from the car while it's still moving. It feels like I've been stuck here since December of 2011 even though it's only been five or ten minutes. Hitchhiking with a perv has that effect on the passage of time, particularly if you're twelve years old and homeless.

(It doesn't help that Justin Bieber keeps panting "baby, baby" over and over again.)

Robbie goes on to lament the loss of various other child actors to adulthood. I

nod and mutter an obligatory "uh-huh" every few minutes, only vaguely paying attention. I just want the car to stop at a red light long enough for me to grab Mini and do a dive roll out the door. Speaking of Mini, he's been busy gathering the most horrific evidence from beneath the passenger seat: a bottle of Jergens, a box of condoms, a camcorder, some kind of giant toy shaped like a man's—

—that's it. I'm jumping. I'd rather take my chances face-surfing the asphalt than sitting here waiting for Ernie's boy-stalker to make his move. I reach for the door handle, then pause, noticing that we're pulling into a gas station.

"Just a little pit stop," Robbie says, parking the car and turning off the engine. "You want anything from the mini mart? My treat."

I start to politely decline his offer when Mini tugs on my jeans. "Ask for something!"

I pay him a questioning look.

"If you say you don't want anything, he might just turn the car back on and drive off to the nearest sleazy motel, with you as his very own personal body pillow. Ask him for a fountain drink and a microwaved burrito. That'll give us time to skedaddle."

I glance awkwardly at Robbie. "Uh...I'll have a drink from the fountain and a microwaved burrito."

"What kind?" he asks.

"Um...beef. And cola."

A moment passes between us.

Robbie's eyes do a quick dart-and-dodge.

"Dude," Mini says. "Is he *checking you out*?"

Robbie smiles. "Right on. Back in a jiffy, stud." He gets out of the car.

I watch him cross the parking lot and enter the mini-mart. As soon as he's inside, I start unbuckling my seat belt.

"Dude, he *totally* just undressed you with his eyes."

"Don't tell me about it." I fumble with the door lock. I've had enough of riding in cars with strangers—

"Wait," Mini says, and crawls onto the driver's seat, where Robbie's left his cell phone. He hefts it in his mitts. "Take this. We can use it to call Theo."

"But that's stealing," I say, frowning.

"It's also illegal for grown men to scarf on underage muff."

I don't exactly know what Mini is talking about, though it does stand to reason that if I want to call Theo (or anyone else) for help, I'll need a phone, and since mine fell into a storm drain, well, Robbie's will have to do.

I grab Mini and the phone; I start to get out of the car.

"Wait!" Mini says again.

"What now?" I ask, half in, half out.

"Grab a box of honey buns."

"What for?"

"Food. Bargaining power. I don't recognize this part of town—we may end up camping out under some smelly bridge for the night."

I hop the rest of the way out of the car. “But...but Theo can come pick us up, right? I mean, we just call him and...”

Mini pats my arm reassuringly, a solemn look on his face. “When did Noah build the ark?”

I shrug.

“Before the rain.” He holds his expression a moment longer, then relaxes, cracks a smile. “Robert Redford. *Spy Game*. Ever see it?”

I glare at him.

“Sorry,” he says, hanging his head. “I quote movies when I’m nervous.”

At least he’s not talking about muff anymore. With my free arm, I reach into the backs eat of Robbie’s car and grab a box of honey buns. Then, hefting the buns, Theo’s doll, and the stolen cell phone, I dart into the night.

# The Megalomoto Factor

**@theo**

It's rough having a mother who looks not a day over twenty-one. Other moms hate my mom for being able to juggle a husband, son, and home-based business with nary a wrinkle or jowl to show for it. Other dads hate my dad for snagging a wife who's managed to maintain her impeccable figure and youthful looks well past the altar. On weeknights, at the gym, strange men whom she's never met come up to her and flirt with tidal force, completely ignoring the fact that she's wearing a wedding ring, and that her twelve-year-old son is doing cardio right beside her.

Then there's the Megalomoto Factor: inserting yourself into someone's life and lingering desperately in the hope that you'll be there on that chance day when everything in my mom's life might possibly turn to mulch, and she might possibly decide to get with you out of some life-affirming need for a random fling. The gym bodies come and go with weight machine availability; Mr. Megalomoto, he comes over for dinner nearly every week. "You should know your boss," he always says, "and he should know you." From what I can tell, about the only thing he wants to know is my mom's bra size.

I feel like I've been trapped here in the dining room for a year and a half. I *hate* when Mr. Megalomoto comes over. I hate watching him hit on Mom while Dad and I (seated together at the far end of a dinner table that's suddenly become forty feet long) pretend we either don't notice or don't care.

Fidgeting, I glance at Dad. His plate's been clean for the last thirty minutes, yet he's still poking and scraping with his fork, desperate to keep his attention anywhere but where it matters.

"Dad?" I murmur. (My voice echoes, as the dining room has, of course, also stretched itself out somehow in order to accommodate the table.)

"Yeah?"

"Has our dining room always been this, er, big?"

He scrutinizes the table a moment. "Huh. It does look a little…off, doesn't it?"

Across the way, Mr. Megalomoto compliments Mom's figure and starts a conversation about nude acupuncture.

(The table lengthens a few more inches, rattling our plates.)

I sigh. Dad shouldn't have to watch this. Mr. Megalomoto should know better than to hit on women to whom he isn't married—and Mom should get her head out of the clouds and realize a smile isn't always just a smile, a friendly comment regarding the firmness of her behind isn't always just a friendly comment. Our

table shouldn't be lengthening. But this is how adults work. It's a lot of flirting and drinking and silent suffering and pretending things are what they're not.

And I've fallen for it.

Mom had told me that Mr. Megalomoto had expressed an interest in having me design a Web site for him. So, I'd cleaned myself up after we'd gotten home from the gym, put on a nice shirt, and come down to dinner—because as much as I want Mr. Megalomoto to lose his car keys down a storm drain, he *does* pay well. But now I'm beginning to think the Web site thing was just an excuse to get his foot in the door. Sort of like how a vampire has to ask permission to enter your home before he'll try to suck your blood. Allegedly.

I suppose there's a silver lining to all of this: Mr. Megalomoto's presence tonight has afforded me a certain level of anonymity. No one's *fussing* over me, no one's hovering over my shoulder and waiting for one of my contacts to fall out so that they can swoop in and catch it before it hits the floor—which is pretty much all Mom and Dad have been doing since finding out about the New Eyes incident. In the mornings, Mom now waits with the car idling until she's satisfied I've made it inside the Boca Linda locker hall in one piece. The worst, though, is if I forget to lock my bedroom door at bedtime, and she happens to walk in on me while I have my contacts out. "Oh," she says, her tone quick, clipped—as if she's walked in on me naked, or masturbating—or masturbating naked with my contacts out. *Oh*.

The rest of the conversation goes something like this:

"Can I get you anything, honey?"

"No thanks, Mom."

"Water?"

"No."

"Tea?"

"No."

"Are you getting enough air? Do you need me to open the window?" Or, if it's cold: "Are you chilly? Do you need me to *close* the window?"

"I'm *fine*, Mom. You worry too much."

"Okay, then. Goodnight, darling."

"Goodnight."

Of course, it's *not* "goodnight." Rather, it's me lying awake and blinking into the darker-than-dark for the next hour as I listen to my parents talk about me in the next room. Dad's on a Google quest to find me a nano-surgeon willing to restore my natural eyesight; Mom wants to start a support group for victims of illegal eye drops; the two of them argue over which parenting methods are more likely to get me to age eighteen with the majority of my body parts intact.

They're losing sleep these days, and it's my fault.

"So, young Master Ivanovich," Mr. Megalomoto says, jolting me out of my reverie and back into the dining room of the damned. "No more glasses for you, eh?"

Dad chokes on a bite of food.

Mom looks like someone's just stepped on her toe.

They talk over each other:

"His new glasses haven't come in yet."

"He's switched to contacts."

A moment of awkward silence.

Mr. Megalomoto looks amused and confused. "Well, which is it, Theo, my man?"

I swallow. It's a simple question. The answer is, of course, "I've switched to contacts." That's what I've rehearsed. That's what Mom and Dad have rehearsed—yet Mom's already flubbed her line and I just *know* I'll do the same if Mr. Megalomoto doesn't let the matter drop and Jesus, why are people interested in stupid things like whether or not I'm wearing glasses anymore—

"Ice cream!" Mom yells, smiling insanely.

Another moment of awkward silence, broken by the sound of something gooey hitting the floor beneath the table—Mr. Megalomoto's sense of amusement, I'm guessing.

"Theo, darling," Mom says, clearing her throat, subduing her tone. "Why don't you get us all some green tea ice cream for dessert?"

"Er, okay, Mom." I push my chair back and leave the table, glad for an excuse to get away from the heat.

In the kitchen, I fetch bowls from the cupboard, spoons from the cutlery drawer. I'm scooping green tea ice cream out of a carton from the freezer when Dad walks in with everyone's dirty dishes.

As he sets them in the sink and turns on the hot water, I ask, "Why do you have Mr. Megalomoto over so often?"

He sighs and says, "I don't have him over so much as he has *himself* over." He shakes his head, makes a half-hearted attempt at scraping excess food from the plates. After a moment, he turns the water off, noticing that I've only set out three bowls. "Aren't you having ice cream?"

"I'm kind of full."

"I know what you mean."

I'm pretty sure he's not talking about ice cream.

"All right, then," he says. "Take care of the dishes, then get on upstairs and make sure all your homework's done. I'll bring the ice cream in."

I nod, handing Dad the scoop and smiling inwardly. This is his way of excusing me from the table, of giving me a reason not to go back into the dining room. I'll take it. Nuts to Megalomoto's Web site.

I get the dishwasher going. Then I go upstairs, unbuttoning the top two buttons of my dress shirt on my way down the hall, breathing a sigh of relief as I open my bedroom door and—

—holy cow.

My room! It's been ransacked!

# Bedroom Apocalypse

**@theo**

My first thought is that Beta's flipped out and gone all Michael-Douglas-in-*Falling Down*. After all, his laptop setup is the only untouched, recognizable part of what used to be my bedroom, and he *is* just standing there with a totally shell-shocked expression on his face. But then I see the opened closet door—the closet where Mini should be locked away for safe keeping—and I *know* what's happened: he's escaped. Mini's escaped, and now he's on the loose, unsupervised, unrestrained. And my room's been turned into a post-apocalyptic wasteland. I'm not even kidding. There's actual rubble scattered across the floor, a pile of human skulls stacked between the bed and the desk.

I close and lock the door, pressing my back up against it. "Beta?"

Beta shakes his head, as if coming out of a trance, and looks at me. "Oh. Hey, little dude."

"What the heck happened to my room?"

A coyote howls in the distance.

Beta says, "You're not going to believe me."

I pay the mountain of skulls another glance. "There's a pile of human skulls now occupying my bedroom. I don't think anything you say can be more unbelievable than that."

"All right, then. It was the strangest thing—this little toy doll started doing cartwheels and screaming about being on some kind of mission to rescue your spunk." Beta shakes his head. "At least, that's what I *thought* I saw."

My brain conveniently discards the part about my spunk. "And you didn't stop him?"

"Well, to be honest, by the time I'd decided I wasn't on some kind of virtual acid trip, the little guy had already done a pretty good job of tearing the place apart. Besides, I know better than to step between a boy and his dolls."

"*Har-har*." I squat to pick up a copy of Glass Hammer's *Perilous*. Luckily the CD's still intact, though the booklet has pictures of stick-figure couples having sex in a variety of exotic positions scribbled in permanent marker throughout. This is getting out of hand. Mini's always been ornery, but he's never trashed a room or destroyed thousands of dollars' worth of manga, Wii games, programming manuals, and progressive rock CDs. I'm not being materialistic; I just think it's wasteful. China. Starving kids. And all that.

Clutching *Perilous* to my chest, I pick my way through the debris. My desk

chair is MIA, and my bed's been flipped upside down, so I sit on the pile of skulls —which is more comfortable than it looks. I take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and ponder the impossibility of trying to get things cleaned up before my parents discover there's now a post-apocalyptic wasteland in their house.

Beta clears his throat. "So, uh...care to explain how or why you've got a plush doll version of yourself running around and causing trouble on your behalf?"

No, not really. "Ever see 'The Enemy Within?' You know, the *Star Trek* episode?"

"Was Captain Kirk born on March 22?" Beta waits for me to answer. When I merely scowl at him, he says, "Of *course*."

"I think Mini's sort of like Party Kirk," I continue, "and I'm supposed to be, er, Stay-at-Home Kirk."

"Except you never went through a transporter clogged up with magnetic ore."

"I'm sure the proliferation of cell phone towers and Wi-Fi hot-spots is a present-day equivalent."

Beta looks unconvinced. "Then why aren't *all* phone-wearing, laptop-carrying kids getting plush cancer?"

"He says he's my, um, inner voice or ego or something."

"Yeah, yeah. A physical manifestation of your inner bad-ass. I know."

"You do?" Oh, God.

"We chatted briefly before he bummed bus fare from one of your pants pockets and booked out." Beta points to where a makeshift rope comprised of tied-together T-shirts and boxer shorts trails out the open window. "I'm telling you, I try to keep an open mind, but this whole thing is weirder than that Joe Salter dude who did an entire triathlon while juggling."

I give Beta a look.

He shrugs. "What? I like to apply what I read in the Weird News section of *the Huffington Post* to the real world. Don't change the subject. You have a mini-me. There's got to be a reason why."

"I don't know," I say. "He just sort of...*happened* one day." And now he's on the loose and doing God-knows-what to who-knows-who. "What am I going to do?"

Beta waves his hand dismissively. "It could be worse: you could have multiple sclerosis and be living on a server."

"Not to be a jerk, but you say that about everything."

Beta blinks. "Not *everything*."

"The other night when I was working on that band Web site and you were playing Wii, I mentioned what a pain it was getting the merchant code integrated, and you told me to mellow out because at least I didn't have MS."

"Okay, that was *one* time—"

"And the night before, when I mentioned that I'd lost my cell phone charger. 'At least you don't have MS and aren't living on a server.'"

"You're a hurtful little bugger sometimes, aren't you?"

I'm really not, though I realize I'm being pretty childish at the moment—and I

hate myself for it. I hate *Mini* for it. He's always telling me that he's my inner self, my mover and shaker. But the more I get to know him, the more I'm convinced he's all plush. I'm *not* a pot waiting to boil over, and I don't think about sex and violence *all* the time. Even so, I'd be lying if I said a small part of me wasn't entertaining the possibility of his being right. What if he really *is* Party Kirk to my Lame Kirk? It's not the fight I'm afraid of, it's, well...what if he wins?

My cell phone rings. I fish it out of my pocket, not recognizing the number but answering it anyway as a means of escaping the moment. "Hello?"

"*Theo? Oh, thank goodness. It's me, Jan. Do you have a minute?*"

"Sure. What's going on?"

"*I'm kind of in bad trouble.*"

# The Appening

**@theo**

Jan's the quiet, disinterested type, the guy who stands nondescript at the edge of a crowd gathered around a seizing shopping mall Santa. He's not shy or introverted or anything (he'll wait to take pictures with his cell phone until *after* he's called 911). He just doesn't overreact like everyone else. That's why it bothers me to hear him talking like he's talking. It's not *what* he's said, it's *how* he's said it. He's concerned, maybe even worried. "I'm kind of in bad trouble." That could mean, "I lost my legs in a bet." Or, "I've killed someone." Or even, "I got lost in the Boca Linda stacks and read from this really old book and I think I've accidentally opened the gates of hell."

The next words out of his mouth could deliver an awful truth—so, naturally, my first instinct isn't to ask what's wrong, but to stall for as long as possible. "How come I don't recognize your number?"

"*Oh, I dropped my phone down a storm drain while waiting for the bus,"* Jan says. "*I'm...borrowing someone else's."*

"Whose?" What's the make? The model? Does it run Android? Have you ever played *Angry Birds*?

"*Do you remember Ernie's sugar daddy?"*

"You mean that time he stuck a celery stalk in a mixing bowl full of caramel and brought it to school as health food?"

"*No, I'm talking about the...wait, Ernie made his own Sugar Daddy?"*

"It was more of an edible heart attack."

"*He really does work hard at his snacks, doesn't he?"*

"If only he put as much effort into his homework. You were saying about his sugar daddy?"

"*Oh, yeah. The pervert he chainmailed into buying him all that junk food."*

"Blackmailed."

"*Yes, blackmailed. He's here in town."*

I cringe. "He is?"

"*I sort of hitched a ride with him. And borrowed his phone."*

"Dude. Why in the world would you hitchhike with Robbie the Friendly Pervert?"

"*I didn't know it was him when I got in the car."*

"And you're sure it's him?"

"*He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and his backseat was filled with honey buns,*

*and he had the Justin Bieber album in his CD player, and Ernie's picture on his dashboard."*

"That's...hilarious."

"*It is?*"

"Totally."

Jan pauses for a moment. "*Why?*"

"Because," I say, "this is the only time in Ernie's life that anyone's actually driven from two states over to make a love connection with him—and it's a grown man."

"*Hm. It definitely looked like he's driven down here to, er, see Ernie. If you know what I mean?*"

"Yeah, well, that's what he gets for fooling around on the Internet."

"*Anyway, he stopped at a gas station, and I sneaked away. I know it's last minute and all, but...*" Jan trails off. It sounds like he's arguing with a very small child. He sighs. "*I was wondering if I could possibly stay at your place tonight.*"

I glance around the ruins of my bedroom. At the moment, it's the last place you'd ever want to invite anybody. But if Jan needs somewhere to crash, I'm not about to turn him away. And besides, his being here will provide insurance should Mom or Dad discover what's happened to my room before I can clean it up (parents won't typically yell at you if there's a house guest in the same room). "Um...sure. As long as you don't mind the mess."

(Beta chuckles.)

"*Mess?*"

"The, uh, neighbor's dog got loose in my room," I lie. "It's no big deal. You're welcome to stay here."

"*Thanks, Theo. You're a life preserver.*"

"Life saver."

"*Yes, that.*"

"Just out of curiosity, is there any reason in particular you can't go home tonight?"

Jan sounds embarrassed. "*You know how Ernie's always joking about how my parents' apartment is so crappy that one day the city's just going to tow it away? Well, it's actually happened.*"

"Wait—when you say 'towed,' do you mean as in what happens to cars left overnight at Boomers?"

"*I don't know what Boomers is, but yeah.*"

"I thought you lived in an apartment."

"*I do. Did.*"

I experience a twinge of bewilderment—before reason kicks in and assures me that Jan's simply gotten his English messed up again. The city doesn't tow entire apartment buildings. That's just crazy.

I get to my feet, nearly losing my footing as one of the skulls becomes dislodged and tumbles to the bottom of the pile. "Where are you? Maybe I can get my mom to pick you up."

"*Um...I'm not exactly sure. One of those outdoor shopping plazas. There's a Rite Aid, and a pizza place—and a cell phone shop.*"

"Do you see any street signs?"

"*No, but there's a Vons across the street, if that helps.*"

"Not really." I think for a moment, wondering if I can hack Jan's GPS signal—but then it occurs to me there might be a simpler way of getting him here. Putting him on speaker, I search Google Play. Sure enough, there it is: the official SuperMegaNet app. Beta. "Are you using a smartphone?"

"*How smart does it have to be?*"

"Smart enough to run Google Play."

"*Let me check.*" Jan goes quiet for a sec. Then: "*Found it.*"

"Okay. Do a search for 'SuperMegaNet' and install it. I'll do the same on my end."

"*There's a SuperMegaNet mobile app now?*"

"Apparently so." I skim the description. The SMN app is free, and is totally compatible with the version of Android I'm running. But here's the thing: I'm having major trouble installing it. It's not a technical issue; it's a mental one. My thumb hovers over the "install" button, twitching, trembling. Of course, I want to save Jan from destitution—but I do *not* want to install SuperMegaNet on my phone. It's bad enough that I got into this whole "ultimate collaboration" thing in the first place; it's even worse that I let Ernie bully me into installing SMN on my work laptop by fornicating with a table in the school library; it'll be the ultimate inconvenience having SMN on my phone. Everywhere I go, my buddy list will go, too. Assuming the SMN app works similarly to the desktop client, I'll no longer be able to shut my phone off when I don't want to see or talk to anyone. I'll have to start leaving it behind whenever I go to the library, or the bathroom...or the bathroom in the library. I really, *really* don't want to install SMN on my phone. Why did I even think about it in the first place? Worst idea ever. I don't need SMN. I'll figure something else out. Jan will understand—

"What's the matter, little dude?" Beta asks.

I look up, realizing that he's been watching me wrestle with my own thumbs for the past thirty seconds. Embarrassed, I quickly hit the "install" button. A moment later, the familiar SMN window pops up. With a heavy heart, I sign in to my account.

So much for weaning myself off this darned program.

Jan logs in as well. When his video feed pops up, I become aware of two things. One, the video quality is excellent. Two (and this creates a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball), Mini is sitting perched on his shoulder.

W. T. F.

Mini waves at me.

I swallow, pretending not to see him. "Ready when you are, Jan."

"I know you can see me," Mini says.

I continue ignoring him.

"Come on. Drop the poop face. It's cool. Jan knows all about you and me."

Jan pauses, looks like he wants to start uploading, but is obviously intrigued by the boy-puppet interaction.

(Indeed, Beta has come to stand behind me, and is watching expectantly over my shoulder.)

I grit my teeth. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Helping out the kid here," Mini replies. "Did you know his apartment was towed?"

I take a deep breath, ruffle my own hair. In my most insinuating tone: "Did you know my bedroom was trashed?"

Mini wags one of his mitts at me. "Hey, I didn't do anything to your room that you yourself haven't been secretly wanting to do ever since you read online that Asia Afrodesia digs 'geeky bad boys who never clean their room.' But we can talk babes later. First Jan and I have to take care of a little business."

Jan raises an eyebrow. "We do?"

Mini scrambles down his arm. His plush face fills the screen as he embraces Robbie's phone. "This'll only take a minute."

## Puppet Wang

**@jan**

"Take some pictures of your wang before we upload."

I blink back at Mini. "What? Why?"

Mini rolls his eyes at me. "Phone is left somewhere obvious. Phone is found preloaded with pictures of underage junk. Phone's owner is whisked off to a nice, cozy prison cell."

I can see the potential of Mini's proposal, but to tell you the truth, I'm not too fond of having pictures of my *junk* floating around on Robbie's phone. What if the person who finds it also happens to like kids? Or what if whoever finds it simply returns the phone to Robbie without poking through his files first? I'll just be doing him a favor.

"I think I'll keep my private parts to myself," I tell Mini.

"Just shoot from the waist down," he says. "It's not like anyone can ID you from looking at your *groin*."

"Underwear was invented for a reason: to keep certain body parts *under*."

"Yeah, but there are also times when it's perfectly reasonable or even necessary to let your wang out."

"Such as?"

"Taking a leak. Showering. Skinny-dipping. Laundry day. Illustrating a point during delicate social situations where mooning isn't logistically feasible. Washing your smoking-hot neighbor's car. Washing your smoking-hot neighbor."

"Those are all very interesting, but I'm still not going to take pictures of myself for Robbie."

Mini looks disappointed. "So, we should just stand idly by and wait for the Shota King to track down Ernie and offer him a ride on the Snack Food Express? You *know* the boy's no good when it comes to sweets! One box of honey buns and Robbie will have him eating out of his hand. A whole backseat full of honey buns and the next thing you know he'll have Ernie wearing the doughnut suit from *Sex Drive* and singing Simple Minds' 'Let There Be Love' while the two of them drive off into the sunset together!" He sighs, holds out his hand. "Never mind. Just give it here."

I stare at him, incredulous.

"The *phone*, not your dong."

Oh. Of course. I set Mini on the ground and hand him Robbie's phone.

"Now, look away," he says, working the touchscreen with his mitts.

I turn my back to him. Momentarily I can see and hear the phone's camera flash going off. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"You won't let your dong pose for the camera, so I'm using mine."

Huh.

"*Hey*—hey!" Theo shouts. "*Stop that!*"

(SMN being an always-on app, while I'm only listening to the sound of Mini taking pictures of his own crotch, Theo is likely staring at a screen full of puppet wang right about now.)

"Okay, I'm finished," Mini says after a moment.

I turn around.

Mini presents Robbie's phone to me as he would a birthday gift. Indeed, and don't ask me how, he's affixed a colorful red bow to the touchscreen.

Taking the phone, I check Theo's SMN window. He's biting his fingernails nervously. There are skulls(?) piled high behind him.

"*Are you ready to upload?*" he asks.

I start to answer, but Mini tugs on my pant leg and starts across the street, toward the shopping plaza.

"Perfect!" he yells. "There's a cell phone store over there! Those guys are always poking through people's files, right?"

I shrug.

"We'll leave the phone on the sidewalk near the door. They'll find it when they open in the morning, and all will be right with the—"

Mini doesn't get to finish his sentence, because at that moment a gigantic SUV teeming with kids fresh from some kind of practice and being driven by the mother of all frazzled soccer moms comes barreling down the street. The front wheel of the SUV pulls Mini under, then spits him out in quick succession; he goes flying through the air and lands in the darkness somewhere down the street.

The SUV continues on unbothered.

"*What's happening?*" Theo asks.

"Mini just got hit by a car," I reply.

# No Copies Allowed

**@theo**

Okay, so, if a plush manifestation of your spunk gets hit by a car, do you feel the impact?

Regardless of the answer, I brace myself, squeezing my eyes shut, gritting my teeth, and going rigid from head to toe. Just so I'll be ready when it hits me. Which, it turns out, it doesn't. There's no physical pain or discomfort, only the social awkwardness of having just performed an impromptu constipation impression—for no reason—in front of Beta.

He takes a step back. "Dude. I'd ask if you just pooped in your pants except I don't want to hear the answer."

"I'm *fine*," I answer, relaxing. To Jan: "Are you still there?"

"*Yes,"* he replies. "*I'm looking for Mini. Give me a second."*

A thought occurs to me. "Don't worry about it if you can't find him. He's just a plush doll. I can always go by there tomorrow to pick him up." Maybe, if there's time. *If*.

"*Nonesuch. He's your* duše*. You don't want to leave something like that out on the streets."*

"Um...what's a *duše*?"

"Your heart and soul," Beta replies. "Your spirit, your psyche—your spunk, for lack of a better term."

"Since when do you speak Czech?"

Beta shrugs. "I've visited enough foreign warez sites to pick up a few key phrases here and there."

"I can't imagine the word *duše* being used anywhere on a warez site."

"Then you've obviously never been to the right sites..." Beta trails off, catching the shimmer in the air as Jan uploads into my room. He's got Mini, scuffed and dirty, draped across his upturned hands; a pair of X's have been sewn into the dimples where Mini's eyes would normally be.

I blink. "Is he...?"

"Alive? Dead?" Jan hands Mini to me. "How can you tell with a puppet?"

"I just thought of something," Beta offers.

"What?" I ask.

"'Soul Puppet' would be a *great* name for a band."

I glare at him, using my Asian half to create an exaggerated manga effect. "Any other thoughts you'd like to share?"

"Just that with me on guitar and you on bass and maybe Jan here on drums we could..." Beta trails off, no doubt alarmed by the intensity of my stare. "We'll talk more later."

Jan glances around my room, paying special attention to Skull Mountain. "*Můj bože*, your neighbor's *dog* did this?"

"Yeah. He's got, uh, anger issues." I stumble over to the closet, toss Mini's corpse inside. I close and lock the door.

Beta clears his throat. "Are you sure that's a good idea, little dude? I mean, you locked him in the closet once before and look where it got you."

I start to ask him if there isn't somewhere else he has to be right now—but then something occurs to me, something so blatantly obvious I can't believe I missed it before. "Wait, this isn't going to work."

Beta nods at me. "Exactly. You can't just lock away your problems in a closet—"

"No, not that." I make my way over to where he and Jan are standing. "I'm talking about you, Jan. You can't stay here."

Jan looks disappointed. "Is tonight a bad night after all?"

"No—yes. I mean, you can stay here, of course, but you can't—" Slow down Theo. Think, speak, in that order. "What I mean is, you *uploaded* here just now. You're not *actual*. You're a copy. If you want to do more than just visit, you'll have to come here for real."

Beta nods at Jan. "It's true. Copy. Quantum computing. Multiple yous existing on multiple planes, one on the server, the other here. Mindphuck. Etcetera."

"*Eh*," Jan groans. "I have to go back?"

I shrug. "Just temporarily. I'll ride out on my bike and pick you up."

Jan sighs. "All right. But we'd better do it quickly—I left Robbie's phone on the sidewalk outside a cell phone store."

"Don't worry, I'm a fast pedaler." I want to say something more encouraging (ie, less stupid), but that's the best I can come up with on such short notice. I pull out my phone and click the "Send Home" button—

—and something strange happens.

Instead of merely winking out, as is typical during an SMN upload, Jan starts, well, *pixelating*. It's sort of like what happens whenever Jan uploads using his parents' lousy DSL connection, except here and now the effect is much fuzzier and much slower.

I look down at my phone. A message box has popped up on the screen. It reads: *Network error. Please try again later.*

I show the phone to Beta. "Have you ever seen this before?"

"Oh, no," Beta says, a look of alarm crossing his face.

I swallow. "What do you mean, 'oh, no?'"

"I mean, '*oh, no*.'"

# The Pixel Monster

**@theo**

"I'm going to need a little more than, 'oh, no,'" I tell Beta.

"This is bad," he says, and grabs my phone, checking my network status. "This is very, very bad."

"I get that part. *How* is it bad?"

"Jan's download was interrupted."

"But I thought SMN is 'always on,' even if you unplug your computer or your battery dies or whatever."

"Power's no problem. This is a *network* issue. The data physically had nowhere to go, meaning Jan's phone was either crushed in an elephant stampede, or there's a major server glitch going on over at Taurus."

I'm starting to dread something terrible. "What does all this mean? Is Jan in trouble?"

Beta hands back my phone and fixes me with an uncharacteristically somber stare. "Look, I know you're the uppity type, what with all the therapy, CBT, calming teas, and excessive gym time, but you should know the truth. The last time I saw an error like this was when I went *virtual*."

*Oh, no* indeed.

"But that's just a worst-case scenario. In the event of a network bottleneck, it's normal for audio, video, and text to be dropped and priority to be given to any pending data transfers." He adds, unnecessarily: "Well, if this *is* just normal network congestion."

I glance at my phone. My SuperMegaNet buddy list is empty. In its place: the word "disconnected," accompanied by a suicidal-looking emoticon wearing the saddest frown you ever saw. Pushing the app into the background, I try calling Jan, try texting him via good ol' fashioned SMS—because I want to know if he's all right, and because I can't pick him up if I don't know where he is.

I look at Beta. "Isn't there something you can do?"

"I could do a search for 'GPS hacking' on YouTube," he suggests.

I frown. "Not helpful."

A shuffling sounds from inside the closet. I pretend not to hear, but Mini's voice carries through the crack beneath the door: "You need me! You *so* need me! I know where Jan is—I checked Google Maps when I was using Robbie's phone for some selfies!"

"Okay," I say, folding my arms. "Where is he?"

"Take me with you, *then* I'll tell you where he is!"

"How can I take you with me if I don't know where I'm going?"

"Okay, I'll give you directions to get you a third of the way there, then—"

"Well, if I've already brought you with me a third of the way, it would be kind of counterproductive not to just keep you with me for the remaining two-thirds."

"You're right. This is silly."

"Totally."

"Take me with you."

"Tell me where Jan is."

"*Take me with you—*"

"Enough!" Beta interrupts. "You two sound like an old hard drive stuck in a CRC loop! Now, you—" He points at me. "Take the little-little dude and go pick up your friend. And you—" He points at the closet door. "—cough up the directions so that we can get this show on the road. Meanwhile, I'll—" He points at himself. "—stay here and tidy up."

I give Beta a genuinely surprised look. "Tidy up?"

"Sure. It's the least I can do, what with you letting me crash here rent-free and all."

I glance at the mountain of skulls. "*This* room? In the state it's in?"

Beta glances warily at the mountain of skulls. "Piece of cake."

The uncertainty in Beta's voice is hardly reassuring, but I figure whatever, let him have at it if he wants to. He could hardly make things worse, even if he tried.

I stumble over to the closet, opening it, grabbing Mini in one hand, my bike helmet in the other.

Mini coos at me. "Missed ya', sweets,"

"Shut up," I say, and stuff him into my pants pocket.

I leave the room and creep down the hallway. On a normal occasion, my initial instinct would be to interrupt my parents' dinner banter with Mr. Megalomoto and ask for a ride, but I press on, keeping quiet as I descend the stairs, keeping focused until I'm out the door, on my bike, and down the street. I've got to keep this together on my own. Asking Mom and Dad to go pick up a friend put in harm's way because of a poor buddy list choice on fat Ernie's part would be revealing yet another crack in the precarious dam of my autonomy. No, I can take care of this myself. I'm an honors student, for crying out loud—I'm in high school. High school kids don't go running to mommy and daddy unless there's a ruptured appendix involved. Or a shattered pelvis. Blood or broken bones, basically.

It's kind of difficult taking direction from Mini with him in my pocket, so I take him out and set him on the handlebars. He's reasonably placid for the first five minutes or so of the trip, but the instant I work up to a decent speed along a direct, gently sloping length of road, he straightens, stretches grandly, his head thrown back, his arms spread wide.

"Dude!" he shouts. "I totally feel like Kate Winslet in *Titanic* right now!"

"Just pay attention to the road," I tell him.

"Seriously. You've got your phone on you, right? We should do a YouTube

video! We'd get *so* many hits!"

"You know what we should totally do?"

Mini looks hopeful.

"Find Jan and get back home before we're busted for breaking curfew."

Mini slouches, pouts. "You know, if the Web design thing doesn't pan out, you should seriously consider work as a door-to-door salesman in the let-me-down industry. Turn left here."

The rest of the way, Mini makes a point of being overtly mechanical with his directions—which is fine by me. The last thing I need right now is to draw unwanted attention by arguing with a plush doll in public.

"This is the place," Mini says when we at last arrive at the shopping plaza. He points across the way. "There's the cell phone store."

And there's Jan, sitting at the edge of the sidewalk. At least, I'm guessing that's him. I'm still too far away to tell; the combination of distance and sparse street lighting has given him the appearance of a fuzzy, pixelated blob.

I pedal toward him, through the empty parking lot—and it dawns on me that something is very, very wrong here. The closer I get to the store, the more focused it becomes, the more detail I can make out. But the pixelated blob person, well, it *stays* a pixelated blob person. I hit the brakes a handful of yards from the curb, wondering if my contacts are malfunctioning, or if maybe this isn't Jan at all but some kind of escaped circus freak who's just finished ingesting Jan and who's now primed for some geek-boy dessert—

The pixel monster gets to its feet.

Waves.

Starts walking toward me.

# Lost Bytes

**Author's Note—ie, "What the fresh hell happened to SMN, Volume 6?!":** The ol' day job kept me pretty busy in 2013. Consequently, I only had enough free time for seven *SuperMegaNet* episodes—and that's certainly not enough to make up a proper volume. So, I've decided to switch to an intricate annual volume numbering system in which episodes published in any given year will be assigned to that year's "volume." As 2014 is the seventh year of the series' run (holy hand grenade, where does the time go?), any new episodes appearing in 2014 will be part of *Vol. 7*; any new episodes appearing in 2015 will be part of *Vol. 8*, etc. Scrumtrulescent ingenuity or blatant cop-out? You decide.

* * *

**@theo**

"You made it!" the pixel monster says, jogging over to where I've stopped and am now gawking, open-mouthed. "Thank goodness! I wasn't sure if you could track me with some kind of geek-phone thing, but I figured if I stayed put you'd be able to find me easier than if I started wandering around...Theo? What's the matter?"

"Um...do I know you?" I start to ask, but the question dies in my mouth as the truth hits me: the pixel monster didn't eat Jan, the pixel monster *is* Jan (I'd recognize that thick Czech accent anywhere). He's become a low-quality JPEG; his clothes, his body are riddled with unsightly compression artifacts, and his eyes are nothing more than indiscriminate dots.

Not knowing what to say, I default to fumbling my cell phone out of my pocket, taking a picture of him, and then handing him the phone so that he can see for himself.

"*Můj bože!*" He touches his pixelated face with his pixelated hands; his voice sounds like a poorly-encoded MP3. "What's happened to me? I look like some kind of classic Nintendo character!"

I hem and haw, trying to articulate at least a smidgen of what Beta told me back in my bedroom. "Uh...Taurus server crash...that is, network congestion...low battery glitch on Robbie's phone..."

Mini stands, kicks the knuckles of one of my hands. "Dude, how in the *world* have you managed to run your own Web design company with such mediocre communication skills?"

"Oh, I have a really well laid-out Web site," I say, "with an extensive FAQ section. Most of the time I don't even have to talk to a client on the phone—" I cut myself off mid-sentence, aware, yes, that by offsetting one of my shortcomings with a self-proclaimed strength, I've actually made myself out to be incredibly naïve. Or incredibly douche-like. Or both.

Mini waves his hand impatiently. "Spare me the insight into your tangled web of anti-social protocols and hold me up."

"Um...okay." I lift him from the handlebars and hold him above my head.

"Lower, please. This isn't a ritual sacrifice."

I lower him.

"For Pete's sake!"

"What?"

"It's like I'm talking to a toddler!"

"You said, 'Hold me up.' You didn't say how high or low or—"

Mini jabs his mitts at Jan's fuzzy form. "Closer to Jan! Hold me closer to Jan!"

Making a face, I move Mini closer so that he's able to lean forward and pat Jan on the shoulder. "There's good news and bad news," he says to Jan. "The good news is that you're not dead. Thankfully Robbie's pedophone had progressive downloading enabled. Your whole body was downloaded in multiple passes of increasing resolution instead of at full-res from top to bottom. Otherwise, you might have materialized on this end a lifeless torso with a smoldering stump where your head should be. Or an upper torso without legs. Or—"

I cut Mini off with a squeeze. "I think he gets the idea."

Mini winces, continues: "The *bad* news is that from here on out you'll only be able to date women who are Minecraftian or made of Lego. Your download was interrupted, and Beta thinks a bunch of your bytes are, well, gone."

"Gone?" Jan asks.

"Gone," Mini and I reply, in unison.

Mini adds, "Forever."

Jan frowns, a subtle rearranging of the pixels of his face. "This is bad." He sits slumped on the curb and stares at his hands, transfixed.

I get off my bike, flipping down the kickstand. I sit beside Jan with Mini cradled in my arms and stare out across the empty parking lot, a shell-shocked expression on my face. If you didn't know any better, you'd think *I* was the one who'd lost his bytes. I'm not trying to make this about me or anything; it's just... well, it's like when a friend tells you something bad has happened to them. Your immediate reaction is to relate, to reply with something like, "I hear you, brah. I once lost my car keys." Only losing your bytes isn't something that's ever happened to me or anyone I've ever known. The closest I can come up with is the hamster eyes thing. I wonder if it was like this for Ernie when I came stumbling into his room that night I went blind. I wonder what I'm supposed to say, what I'm supposed to do, how I'm supposed to act—

CBT. CBT. *CBT*.

"What's CBT?" Jan asks.

I blink, coming out of a reverie I didn't even know I was in. "What? Why?"

"You were mumbling it over and over just now."

"Oh. It stands for 'cognitive behavior therapy.' It's something my therapist taught me."

Jan nods.

A car passes on the street.

Awkward silence.

I clear my throat. "In a stressful situation, you're supposed to counter any negative thoughts you might have with positive ones. Or you can visualize your worries being squashed, stomped, vaporized. I like to imagine the cargo bay from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. There's a scene in "Disaster" where Geordi and Beverly have to depressurize the bay in order to put out a plasma fire. There are these drums of quaratum that are at risk of reacting to the plasma fire and exploding—only instead of quaratum, I imagine that they contain all my worries. When the cargo bay depressurizes, the drums get blown out into space, taking my worries with them."

Jan blinks at me incredulously.

"I have another mantra for you," Mini murmurs. "TMI. TMI. TMI."

I toss him over my shoulder; he lands on the concrete with a soft thud and a hard swear.

More awkward silence.

Another clearing of my throat. "You know, the Dark Energy Survey has this super-powerful camera that can detect light from parts of the universe that were around only a few billion years after the Big Bang."

Again, Jan blinks at me.

I shrug. "I'm just saying that if light from eight billion years ago still exists somewhere, your missing bytes must still exist, too."

"More like *mega*bytes, you mean," Mini offers, dusting himself off in the background. "*Giga*bytes, even. And if we *do* get them back, there's still the matter of how in the hell we reintegrate them back into Jan—"

"Mini," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Not helpful." I face forward again—and go wide-eyed as a brightly-colored, eight-bit, distinctly *Donkey Kong*-ish barrel rolls down the street.

"Theo?" asks Jan.

"Yeah?" I reply.

"Did you just see an old-timey *Donkey Kong* barrel roll by?"

I think I did.

# Honkey Kong

**@theo**

Pop quiz: You meet up with your friend whose apartment has recently been towed, whose boy-crazed admirer has abandoned him at the side of the road while making a pre-amatory pit-stop at the local gas n' guzzle, and whose bytes have been scrambled in a freak SuperMegaNet downloading accident. Do you:

A. Run an anti-virus scan on said friend.
B. Gawk as politely as possible.
C. Go chasing after an eight-bit barrel in the middle of the night like the easily-distracted twelve-year-old you are.
D. None of the above.

The correct answer, of course, is C: go chasing after an eight-bit barrel in the middle of the night like the easily-distracted twelve-year-old you are. There are several justifications for this. One, in what universe is *not* immediately investigating sudden runaway pixel art socially or morally acceptable? More importantly, distractions are good when you're trying not to think about what you're *supposed* to be thinking about. The unfortunate state of Jan's bod, in particular.

A second barrel rolls by, followed by a third.

Wordlessly, I grab Mini, jump to my feet, and run for my bike, raising the kickstand and getting on. Jan perches himself behind me and we're off, shooting across the parking lot, toward the street.

"Wait, not that way," Jan says.

I brake at the curb. "Huh?"

"You're heading in the same direction that the barrels are rolling," Mini says.

"So?"

"Far be it from me to squelch your adventurous spirit, but don't you think it would be more interesting to see where the barrels are coming *from* as opposed to the boring pile where they're going to end up?"

Jan nods. "What the doll said."

Oh. Right.

Making a slight course adjustment, I turn onto the street and kick into high gear. More barrels come at semi-regular intervals, causing drivers to swerve, late-night pedestrians to leap out of the way. Lucky for us, the spectacle is so distracting that no one seems to notice I'm giving a lift to a pixel monster and a talking

puppet. Eventually we end up in a middle-class neighborhood, with mostly single-stories sporting creepy yard gnomes overseeing concrete driveways instead of actual lawns—

"Holy crap!" Mini shouts as we speed around a corner. "The barrels are coming from Ernie's grandparents' house!"

I stop beside the mailbox, craning my neck so that I can more effectively take in the eighty-two-foot-tall construction of ladders and girders that's standing in the driveway. It's a little hard to tell, but it looks like Mrs. Goodale (retrofied in large, unabashed pixels like the rest of the structure) is standing on the topmost girder, a stack of barrels at her side. Further up, on a smaller platform, Ernie appears to be bundled in a sleeping bag, with large Z's emanating in a plume above his head.

"*This* is Ernie's place?" I ask, incredulous.

"The house, yeah. The girders...I have no idea where they came from."

I shake my head. This the worst case of over-parenting I've ever seen. "It looks like something out of the original *Donkey Kong*."

"You mean *HONKEY Kong*," Mini says, well aware of my affinity for the Boots Electric album of the same name.

"What's Ernie doing up there?" Jan asks.

"Dying a slow, meaningless death," Mini replies.

Mrs. Goodale grumbles something unintelligible, grabs a barrel from her pile and hurls it. The barrel makes its way down the top girder, then drops onto the next girder and starts rolling in the opposite direction, slowly but surely working toward ground level.

"How did this happen?" I ask.

"I told you before," Mini says. "Ernie's in trouble. He needs your help."

"Me? Why?"

"Because you're his best friend."

I scoff. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

I narrow my eyes. "Honey buns are Ernie's best friend. Size 36 relaxed fit jeans are Ernie's best friend. Xbox, porn, Jergens, Kleenex—those are Ernie's best friends. I'm just one of the unfortunate souls who was given the same group assignment on the first day of school."

Mini smiles, folds his arms. "Save the lies. I'm your plushness. You can't hide anything from me. Your inspirations, motivation, hopes, dreams, fears—beneath that cool, clear, Zen-boy image of yours you're a mess because you really care about Ernie. You want to be friends with him again—you've grown accustomed to his fat."

My knee-jerk reaction is to deny everything Mini has just said, but doing that would only incriminate me further, so I end up not saying anything at all. Which only incriminates me further.

"Fine. Be a douche." Mini looks at Jan. "Will *you* go?"

Jan shrugs. "I'm not very good at retrograde games."

I start to correct him—

"Oh, for crying out—to hell with both of you!" Mini scampers onto the ground and starts across the driveway. "I'll take care of this myself!"

I watch him go, toddling, tripping, cursing, toddling some more, tripping again...and I realize he's destined for doom. Even if he makes it all the way to the top of Mrs. Goodale's girder palace, what then? Throw Ernie over his shoulder and book like the dickens? Fight Mrs. Goodale to the death? Either way he's going to be *crushed*—and I'll admit, while part of me would like to be rid of the plushness, another more exasperating part is wondering: what happens to me if Mini dies? Does a part of me die, too? Do *I* die?

"*Ugh*." I get off my bike, nodding at Jan. "Watch my bike."

Jan nods back. "For the win."

"Whatever."

I run after Mini, scooping him up and stuffing him into my pocket. He situates himself, starts to say something about me not being such a hapless, quivering coward after all, but trails off when one of Mrs. Goodale's barrels comes tumbling our way. Without time to think, worry, or over-analyze my options I jump over the barrel, dart forward, then jump over a second barrel, riding a jolt of adrenaline as I make my way toward the ladder leading up to the second platform. Every barrel I clear earns me a hundred points, which flash briefly above my head before disappearing. On reaching the ladder, I grab onto its rungs and start my ascent. Halfway up and I have to pause, heart hammering in my chest, nerves on fire.

"Don't tell me you're winded already!" Mini exclaims.

"I'm not winded," I reply. "I just...this whole thing is—what lapse in logic, what quirk of science could possibly allow—isn't *anyone* but me disturbed that Ernie's grandma has the ability to transform into mythological creatures and classic video game characters at will, and has erected an eighty-two-foot-tall remake of *Donkey Kong*, Screen 1 in her driveway?!"

"Need I remind you, you're talking to a plush doll?"

*Touché.*

I continue up the ladder, climbing onto the second girder with surprising agility. I mean, I guess I've got the arms and legs for it, but this is the first time I've actually used my mom's gym membership out in the field, as it were. I'm feeling a bit newb-ish.

"Heads up!" Mini screams as another barrel comes our way.

"*Why* is she throwing barrels at us?" I exclaim, doing an inadvertent somersault that, while initially effective, results in my slipping, screaming like a little girl, falling, and clinging to the underside of the girder with all my might.

"Dude!" Mini yells. "Shawn Johnson you are not!"

"Not helpful!" I yell back, and haul myself back on top of the girder—no small feat considering there are barrels coming at regular intervals now. I run, I jump, I climb the next ladder, cross the next girder. Somehow I make it all the way to the top unscathed. Well, *physically* unscathed. Mentally, I'm absolutely losing it.

"Oh, geez," Mini says, obviously feeling my trembling. "Don't tell me you're afraid of heights."

"It's not that," I reply. "I sort of have a thing about old people. I have this recurring dream where I'm walking down the street on a Sunday—"

"Yeah, yeah. Save it for your next session with Dr. Freud. What do we do about *her*?"

Mrs. Goodale stands firm at the other end of the girder. She fixes Mini and me with a demented glare. "You're up past your bedtime."

I take a tentative step forward. "Uh, Mrs. Goodale?"

Mrs. Goodale picks up another barrel...

"Please, Mrs. Goodale..."

...raises it above her head. "The name's *Womack*, you precocious moppet! Goodale is the *recessive* side of the family!" She hurls the barrel at us.

I time my jump.

I earn another hundred points.

I land with feet planted firmly—

—and Mini goes tumbling out of my pocket, takes a horrendous slow-motion dive over the edge of the girder.

"Mini!" I scream, lunging forward to try and catch him—but it's too late. Down he goes. My torso slams hard against the girder at about the same time as Mini, eight stories below, bounces onto the concrete driveway.

Mrs. Goodale—I mean, *Womack*—cackles fiendishly.

I roll onto my back. She's standing over me, grinning from ear to ear. "Any last words?" she asks, wielding another barrel.

I swallow. "Uh...Neil Diamond for president?"

Womack starts to cackle. She lifts her barrel, ready to hurl it onto my head, spraying blood and hair and brains and teeth everywhere—

—Mini reappears on the girder. He's holding an oversized hammer.

I blink. "How'd you...?"

"I had an extra life, apparently," Mini says. He swings the hammer.

Womack starts to turn around—but, as she's old, and as we *are* perched precariously on a narrow girder, she doesn't have time to react fully before Mini brings his hammer down onto her foot. Screeching, she lifts her injured foot, rotates momentarily on her good foot, slips, flips *upside freakin' down*, and, well, here's the problem: in order to dodge out of the way before she flattens my three dimensions into one, I have to roll either left or right, and rolling left or right means rolling *off* the girder. Of course, this doesn't occur to me until my reflexes have already sent me careening over the edge. Luckily, I manage to grab on at the last moment—but it's not a secure purchase, and I know I've only got a few seconds before gravity has its way with me.

Mini drops the hammer, dives forward and grabs my hand, using all his might to keep me from tumbling to my death. (Behind him, Womack rolls off the girder and disappears below.)

"Pull me up!" I shout.

"I will," Mini says. "But first you've got to do something for me."

"What?"

"You've got to make me a promise."

My fingers are slipping. "Um, is now the best time for this?"

"You've got to promise me that before the night is over, you'll unleash your spunk."

"What? No way!"

"Promise me, Theo. Promise me you'll lock yourself in the bathroom for an hour and do with yourself what any *normal* twelve-year-old would."

"Dude, this is neither the time nor the place—"

"Do you want to keep me from destroying bedrooms, running amok all over town and dropping love letters into girls' lockers on your behalf?"

"Wait, *what?*"

"Just promise me you'll spill a little spunk and I'll back off."

One of my fingers pops free— "Okay! Fine! I promise! Just *pull me up!*"

Mini nods, pulls me up.

## In Ernie's Time of Dying

**@theo**

With Mini's help, I roll onto the girder and lie on my back for a moment, catching my breath. Save for Ernie's uneven snoring emanating from above, the night is still, eerily quiet. I wonder if this is a dream or reality. I mean, things like this don't happen—middle-aged women do *not* just erect giant *Donkey Kong* tributes on their front lawns. Why in the world haven't any of the neighbors called the police to report the noise? The multiple building code violations? The dozens of barrels hurled down the street?

"Mini?" I ask.

"Yeah?" he replies.

"Did you just kill Ernie's grandma?"

"That woman died the day she entered menopause. I just put the nails in the coffin."

"That's it, then," I murmur. "I'm going to prison."

Mini waves his hand. "Play the perceptive flux card. Worst-case scenario, you do some time in a mental institution. But it won't come to that." He peers over the edge of the girder. "I don't think I killed Mrs. Womack in the traditional sense. There's no chunky splatter in the driveway. She's just...gone."

I glance over the edge. Indeed, there's no grandma chunkage to speak of. At the end of the driveway, Jan is standing dutifully beside the mailbox. Momentarily he waves and makes a questioning gesture. "Okay, so you've made her disappear completely. *So* much better."

"That's the spirit."

"I was being sarcastic."

"Dude. Remember when she turned into a griffin?"

I was hoping that had been a bad dream. "Yeah."

"I'm betting," Mini says, "she didn't physically transform at all. Her *perceived state* did. Young kids pick up on this kind of thing all the time. Quick-witted preteens such as yourself, while generally more interested in sports, cell phones, and girls, are receptive to perceptive flux as well."

"Or I'm just losing my mind."

Mini scowls. "That's what the head doctors and pharmaceutical companies want you to believe so that you'll line up dutifully to buy their next fancy pill. Yes, sometimes a case of the crazies is just a case of the crazies—but sometimes it's you regaining the clarity you had as a child. Visualize: you're six years old and you

accidentally break your mom's favorite coffee mug while playing *Dinner Table Ninja* in the dining room. Your mom scolds you in the standard hands-on-hips, how-many-times-have-I-told-you tradition passed down from generation to generation of moms the world over. But your six-year-old gray matter doesn't process this at all. Instead, you see a ranting, raving lunatic with clawed hands and smoldering holes for eyes. Your mother's the same as she's always been—your perception of her has merely accommodated her agitated state."

I sit up. "How do you know all this?"

"You know all those epic tomes cramming the bookshelves in Chandelier's office? They're not just for show. They're full of all kinds of interesting tidbits. While you're busy trying to fend off dubious questions about latent Oedipal tendencies, I'm learning how the universe works."

That's all fine and dandy for Mini, but I think I'm more confused now than I was a moment ago. "If claws and gross, disgusting fire eyes are symbolic of angry motherhood, what's all *this* supposed to be?" I wave my hand in the air for effect.

"Easy peasy. It's a visual metaphor for over-parenting that was triggered by a skewering of Womack's perceptive state—a mental excursion, if you will, fabricated by your brain as a way of coping with pent-up feelings of guilt and loneliness since abandoning your best friend when he needed you most."

"Not the best friend thing again—"

"Or maybe the world's always been like this, and you're only now becoming aware of it."

"*Maybe*," I say, getting to my feet (and trying not to look down in the process), "I'm just a terminal insomniac hallucinating due to lack of sleep."

Mini looks annoyed. "Occam's razor is *so* cliché in this day and age. But whatever floats your boat." He holds up his arms. "Pocket me and let's be on our way."

I don't know how Mini can be so...*chill*. Though I guess if you're a talking doll, you kind of have to be cool with the extraordinary. Otherwise, you'd never come to terms with your own existence. Kind of like Miley Cyrus on realizing her wagging white tongue is now more famous than she is.

Putting Mini in my pocket, I ascend the final ladder and climb onto the topmost platform, where Ernie lies wrecked.

(Before we go any further, I should point out that Ernie is by no means a polite or gentle snorer. He's one of those people who sleeps with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open, the most horrendous gurgling, choking, and wheezing noises emanating from somewhere deep down inside his throat. There are literally Z's rising above his head. How his body is getting enough oxygen is beyond me.)

I crawl over to where he is. His sleeping bag is bundled tight—like a cocoon—and his neatly-parted hair glistens with some kind of viscous pomade. His shirt collar is buttoned tight around his neck. "Ernie?" I whisper, poking him.

No response.

I poke him again. "Hey, Stay Puft. Wake up. I'm here to, uh, rescue you. Or whatever."

Nothing.

I nudge Ernie's shoulder a few more times. "Dude, wake up. It's me, Theo."

Finally, Ernie comes awake, cracks open one bloodshot eye. "*Afglab*...hamster eyes?"

"Dude, what's with you? What's going on?"

Ernie coughs, mumbles something that sounds like "corn poodle."

"Impeccable bedside manner—end sarcasm," Mini says, and climbs out of my pocket, crouches beside Ernie's head. He feels for a pulse, checks behind Ernie's ear, fingers a lock of his hair.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Not asking stupid questions," Mini replies. "That's what I'm doing."

Ernie stirs again, fixing me with a dire stare. "Must...live on...suck up to Biclops...use his Chinese-Russian superpowers to maintain...B average via cheat-sheet osmosis. Must exploit...dirty Czech's brawny Euro-body in...shameless *Midnight Cowboy* fashion. Live dream of...defeating Eva and Summer and Lily and all other jockettes...make fun of...sparkly pompoms and lame, self-absorbed cheerleaders with...fat soccer moms with multiple, layered chins..."

"He's delirious," Mini says.

"Yeah," I agree. "We need to get him to a hospital."

Ernie shakes his head insistently. "No hospitals!"

"But—"

"Debt-inducing towers of death! They'll just...*bleh*...call my grandparents!"

"Um, that's kind of a good thing—"

"You don't understand!" Ernie coughs again, wipes a smattering of blood on his sleeve. "They...took it all away. They...did this...to me."

I'm about to ask what he means when Mini quiets me with a wave of his hand. "No, wait—I think I know what's going on here."

"You do?"

"Yeah—it's so simple I can't believe we didn't think of it before. Your average, everyday witch doctor looks at symptoms and nothing else, tries pumping his patient full of drugs and painkillers—he tries to hide the *effect* without considering the *cause*."

"The *For Dummies* version, please."

Mini puts on an air of confidence. "Ernie's got an acute case of withdrawal. Being nice and behaving is killing him."

"Being nice and behaving is killing him," I repeat, doubtful.

"No, really. It all makes sense. When did he start getting sick? When his grandparents put him on restriction. When the lock went back on the refrigerator. When his computer was taken away. No junk food, no gaming, no porn."

"But...but that can't make someone violently ill." Can it?

"Think of it this way: a normal person relieves tension and stress through normal exercise, physical exertion, meditation. Ernie doesn't exercise at all, and thinks meditation is only suitable for monks and Richard Gere. But over the years his body has developed a method of rerouting his various tensions, pressures, and,

yes, excess gasses, through chronic misbehavior. By calling someone a 'greasy whore,' he's getting the same endorphin rush a normal person would get when they, say, win a spelling bee, or when they place first during a marathon."

I shake my head. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Did you get *nothing* out of the perceptive flux conversation we just had?" Mini dismisses me with a wave of his hand, reaches into my pocket. "Never mind. You just sit there and look darling while I handle this." He pulls out my cell phone.

"Hey!" I try to grab him, but he scurries out of reach. "What are you doing?"

"Calling an ambulance," Mini replies.

"Oh." I relax—but only for a moment, because it suddenly becomes obvious that Mini's *not* calling for an ambulance, he's instead loading a porn video, and is holding the phone up for Ernie to see. I start to swipe at Mini, scrambling across Ernie's soft bulk—and pausing, one arm buried in his fat, the other extended toward Mini and my moaning, gasping phone, on which a sweaty man and woman are battering their genitals together like there's no tomorrow. I look down at Ernie; he's watching intently, his eyes wide open, his breathing more even, the color returning to his face.

"Holy crap," I murmur. "It's working."

"Just like I knew it would," Mini says, rolling his eyes.

I hang there for a moment, frozen, my attention divided equally between the extramarital frolicking on my phone and the miraculous flooding of life back into Ernie. Down below, in the driveway, Jan is no doubt watching us and wondering why the heck we've taken five to watch porn in the middle of a rescue.

Momentarily, the sweaty couple's frolicking reaches a totally unrealistic, but nevertheless awe-inspiring crescendo.

I settle back on my haunches and clear my throat uncomfortably. "So...what now?"

Ernie shrugs, takes my phone and cues up another dirty video.

Mini peers over the edge of the girder. "Crap."

"What is it?" I ask.

"It just occurred to me that the scariest part of getting down is getting down."

# Animatronic Ventriloquism

**@theo**

The ride home feels like the setup to a lame joke: a boy and his blob, a pixel monster, and a talking puppet go for a bike ride in the middle of the night... Except it's less a bike ride and more an experiment in wobbling and weaving. Ernie, pressed between me and Jan (and still watching porn on my phone), weighs as much as a small moon, and Jan seems to be having trouble holding on, what with his hands being all pixelated.

Meanwhile, Mini's the proverbial backseat driver, shouting annoying suggestions every few minutes and thinking he's being helpful: "You need to shift your center of gravity! Lean left more! Lean right! No, no—tilt *left* when you pedal right, and tilt *right* when you pedal left! Pump those thighs! Blast those quads! Let's get this Huffy up to eighty-eight!"

"Mini?" I rasp.

"Yeah?"

"You. Are. Close. To. Death."

"And *you* are building a compelling case for a full refund on your mom's fancy gym membership."

I grit my teeth, squinting, tasting salty sweat on my lips. "Do *you* want to pedal?"

Mini sneers. "Like my mitts could reach!"

"That's right, then. Keep quiet before someone spots us and calls our parents."

Mini quiets, settles in my pocket.

I huff and puff for another minute or two, during which time a middle-aged jogger dude sidles up alongside us with ease.

"You're out a little late for a bike ride," he says, smiling at first, paying me a friendly enough glance—and tripping over his own feet when he sees Ernie and/or Jan. "Dear God! What's that on your back?"

("*Těší me,*" Jan sighs, and slumps his shoulders dejectedly.)

I hem and haw, gasp and splutter, trying to come up with any number of reasonable explanations.

Mini beats me to the punch: "*Minecraft* cosplay," he answers. Then, realizing he's only raised further questions by inadvertently drawing attention to himself, he adds, "Oh, and animatronic ventriloquism."

The jogger slows, stops, watches our continued struggle onward with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

"It's, uh, for a class project," I call over my shoulder—

"Plunder my cervix!" screams the woman in Ernie's current porn video.

Pedaling on without another word to the jogger dude (because that's what you do when you're caught watching porn in public: you lower your head in shame and recede into the darkest corner of the night as quickly as possible), I quietly and carefully reach into my pocket, pull out an old receipt. I crumble it, toss it over my shoulder.

"What was that?" Jan asks.

"My dignity," I reply.

"On a piece of paper?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." A pause. "Is that an American thing?"

"No," Mini replies on my behalf. "It's a pompous southern-Californian thing."

"It was to make a *point*," I clarify.

"It was also littering."

"It's paper. It'll biodegrade." I sneak a glance at Ernie. His eyes are glued to my phone, which is clutched tightly in his hand, and while I'm pleased to see that his health has been steadily improving over the last twenty minutes, it's a little unsettling that the key to said improvement has been a non-stop stream of vulgar cervical allusions and exaggerated orgasms. I can't see his other hand; God, I hope he's using it to hold onto my bike and not...himself. "Think you can turn the volume down a little bit?"

"Heh," Ernie grunts, and holds the phone closer.

I swat it out of the way. "Just keep the volume down. It's after curfew."

"Curfews are made to be broken," Ernie says, nonchalant, and cues up more porn.

"Fantastic. Remind me to tell that to the judge during our sentencing—I'm sure he'll say the exact same thing. 'Very good, Mr. Ivanovich. Curfews *are* made to be broken, and plastic bags are play toys for small children. I have a line of coke here on my planner. Would you like to do it with me?'"

Mini climbs up my arm and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Dude, relax. No one gives a crap that we're out after dark. Pull yourself together and actually *use* some of that CBT Dr. Freud's been slinging our way. If you think you're having bad thoughts, then you're going to have bad thoughts. If you think you're being followed by cops in the middle of the night, then you're going to be followed by cops in the middle of the night. But if you think *positive*..."

I scowl. "No, if a cop decides to bust us because we're loud, underage, pixelated —" I gesture at Ernie. "—fat, and out past curfew, thinking about whether they are or aren't going to bust us has nothing to do with whether or not they actually bust us."

"Did *Surf Ninjas* teach you nothing?

"How could *any* scene from *Surf Ninjas* apply right now?"

"Dude, Neal Israel masterpiece—there's *so* much wisdom there!" Mini takes on a storytelling stance (whatever that is). "Iggy spent the first three-quarters of the

movie worrying about misusing his power of suggestion, accidentally screwing over his friends with it, losing it during a moment of carelessness—and missing the point of possessing the power of suggestion in the first place. The only reason he'd never surfed a day in his life was because he *believed* he couldn't surf. It took Johnny to finally make him realize that he could use his powers on himself as well as on others. 'But what if you could [surf]? The ability's within you, bro.' And it was, and he did."

Okay, under no circumstances is *Surf Ninjas* a metaphor for positive visualization...but maybe Mini's got cred. Maybe being out so late isn't the worst thing in the world. Maybe I'm just tired and worried for the sake of being worried. We'll get home all right; we'll figure out what to do about Jan.

Maybe I *can* surf.

"Darn!" Mini peers wide-eyed over my shoulder.

I follow his gaze—and spot the police cruiser that's turned onto our street, and is fast approaching from behind.

# Urban Tactics

**@theo**

There's a police car coming toward us—of *course* there's a police car coming toward us. That's what the police do: cruise the after hours in search of mischievous kids taking late-night bike rides past curfew.

"We're screwed," I gasp.

"We're not screwed," Mini replies.

"There's a police car right behind us!"

"It's not *right* behind us. It's at least several car-lengths away."

"Like that matters? In a few seconds it's going to sidle up alongside us, the cop's going to flash his lights, blare his siren, tell us to pull over. He'll ask to see some identification, I'll show him my school ID, and that'll be it. Handcuffs, the backseat of a squad car, overnight behind bars, Mom in tears when she shows up tomorrow morning with the $500,000 to bail me out in time for the hearing—"

"$500,000?" Ernie sneezes offensively; I can feel his mucus soaking through the fabric of my shirt. "Dude, don't act like you're worth anything less than a cool million."

"Lay off the rich white boy thing, fat boy," I warn as a sudden, torrential sweat moistens my face. To Mini: "What do we do?"

Mini gives me a look. "What do you mean, what do we do?"

"*The cop following us—what do we do about the cop following us?*"

"Pish. He's not following us."

The cruiser, clearly following us, sidles up alongside in the left lane.

"Maybe he's just passing by," Jan says.

The cruiser's passenger window rolls down—and here's the thing: it's late, I'm tired. I'm not entirely sure how much of this is real, and how much is my brain interpreting the world around me through a hypnagogic haze, but I swear to you the most gnarly-looking police officer in the world is sitting behind the wheel of that cruiser. He's got the look of a man who's lost his wallet, gotten a flat tire in the middle of traffic, and broken up with his wife—all on the same day. He's the Terminator. He's Axe Cop. He's a circa *Conan the Barbarian* Jason Momoa playing a psychotic law-enforcement agent whose massive, rippling upper-torso is ready to burst out of his uniform at the slightest sign of trouble.

"*Curfew!!*" he roars, jabbing an accusing finger at me.

Or maybe he just asks, in a normal tone of voice, what I'm doing out so late at night, and if I need any help. But I can only see and hear the Momoan. This is no

longer reality, it's a mental twilight into which I've somehow pedaled unaware. Here boogeymen and boogeywomen water their lawns and take their little boogeychildren to soccer practice in broad daylight. Here, where Firefox, Google Chrome, and Opera were never born, Internet Explorer 6 still rules the Web, and PNG transparency is but a madman's dream.

This is where Mrs. Womack's griffin half resides.

I pretend (poorly, mind you—acting has never been my strong suit) not to notice the police officer, and pedal slightly faster. There's a fine line I don't want to cross, a peace I don't want to break by acknowledging the officer and thereby singling myself out amidst traffic. But intent and implementation are arch enemies; my fight or flight instinct has kicked in, and it's mostly flight at the moment.

The result: Officer Momoa is now cruising at a slightly faster speed, while I'm pedaling all-out in an attempt to get nowhere fast. Again, he asks placidly if I know what time it is, if I need any help.

I hear, "*I'mgonnagetyoukid!!*"

Mini shakes his head in disgrace. "You know the idiot suspects you see in police chase footage on the news? You've become one of those."

"I..." *Pant!* "...have..." *Gasp!* "...not!"

"Says the guy whose brilliant plan to not get picked up for breaking curfew is to outrun a police car on his *Huffy*." Mini pulls a plush cell phone from a pocket I only now realize he's got sewn into his side. "I'll take care of this."

"How do you..." *Pant!* "...have a cell phone?"

"Dude—it's the twenty-first century. *Everyone* has a cell phone."

"I don't," Jan offers, wistful.

Ernie, on auto-reply: "Czechs don't count."

(I hear a soft thud, which I can only assume is Jan giving him a pixelated punch in the soft bulk of his back.)

Meanwhile, Mini has proceeded to strip naked, and, keeping hold of his phone with one hand, is stuffing his clothes into my pocket. "I'm applying technology to a real-world situation," he explains when he sees the WTF expression on my face. "Toss me onto the copper's hood."

"What?" *Gasp!* "Why?"

Mini rolls his eyes as if annoyed that I don't already know the answer. "What's worse than breaking curfew?"

I shrug, wobbling, compensating.

"Breaking curfew with your junk hanging out. Maybe if he's paying attention to *me*, he'll stop paying attention to *you*. Now..." He spreads his arms, gives me an affirmative nod. "Throw me, brah."

I grab him, hurl him at the police cruiser. He soars through the air in epic slow-motion, twisting, rotating, bellowing a heroic battle cry at the top of his lungs. I think his intention is to land on the car in some kind of uber-cool ninja pose. Instead, he tumbles clumsily across the hood and disappears over the edge.

Officer Momoa swerves briefly, surprised by the plush assault, but is otherwise unaffected. Rather, ticked that a snot-nosed kid is throwing puppets at his car, he

turns on his warning lights, gives me a very specific gesture to pull over immediately.

"I don't think that went according to plan," Jan says.

Ernie, again, on auto-reply: "Dude. You throw like a girl."

I start to point out that it's difficult to throw things while keeping one's balance and simultaneously managing the weight of a baby elephant when suddenly Officer Momoa lets loose a howl of surprise and slams on the brakes, veering away from us. After a moment, it becomes apparent why: Mini hasn't fallen off the car after all, but is actually clinging to the side, his phone clamped tight in his mouth, a look of grim determination on his face as he claws his way back onto the hood.

The cop, obviously freaked out by the concept of a living, naked doll on his car, has lost all sense of poise, and is trying to shake off the possessed plushie any way he can, in the process side-swiping another car inadvertently, rolling up onto the curb, and knocking over a mailbox. A flurry of envelopes erupts into the air.

Mini holds tight, makes his way up to the windshield. He holds up his little cell phone, aims it at the cop, and hits the send button—

—and Officer Momoa uploads instantaneously.

*OMFG.*

Mini's used SuperMegaNet on a police officer.

I hit the brakes, my bike stuttering. Our momentum (most of it Ernie's) causes us to lose our balance, and we end up falling, toppling onto the street as the car behind us comes to a screeching halt mere inches from where we're lying in a heap, arms and legs splayed every which way.

Officer Momoa's police cruiser careens past. Half a block down the street, it lurches onto the sidewalk—right into a telephone pole.

Sparks fly.

For absolutely no reason, the car bursts into flame.

Oncoming drivers swerve off the road to avoid the accident. Somewhere nearby a woman's scream pierces the night air. Pedestrians duck for cover.

Ernie lifts his head from the ground, coughs phlegm. "Holy crap, white boy."

I look at him.

He looks back at me, holds up my phone. "I think I broke your phone."

# Throw On

**@theo**

I'm kind of in shock the rest of the way home. Somehow my body animates itself, righting my bike, piling everyone back on, and channeling the heck out of my inner Lance Armstrong. Jan asks once or twice if I'm going to backtrack and pick up Mini (assuming he's survived the explosion), but I'm not listening. All I can think about is getting to my laptop ASAP and doing a Google search for the keywords, "cops arrest throw puppet police car." You know, just to get an idea of what happens to people when they toss their puppets at moving police cars. That way I'll know what to expect at the hearing.

At long last, I turn onto Poinsettia—and stop a short ways into the cul-de-sac, quickly swerving behind a neighbor's parked car.

Behind me, Ernie makes a noise like a water cooler burping.

"Is this your house?" Jan asks.

I shake my head. There's sweat burning my eyes; my clothes are drenched. I want to shower and go straight to bed, but first I have to get back inside my parents' house—and that's going to be harder than it had been getting out, because Mom and Dad are standing in our driveway and taking their dear sweet time showing a noticeably tipsy, post-dinner Mr. Megalomoto to his car.

"My parents are outside," I whisper.

"That's good," Jan says. "We got back just in time."

"How's it good that the only two people on this Earth I wouldn't want catching me sneaking in after hours are basically blocking the entrance to my home?"

Jan shrugs. "It's when they go back inside to check on you, *that's* when you're in trouble. Out here, they're not paying attention to anything but their little talk."

"Smalltalk," I say, correcting him.

"What?"

"Never mind. What are we supposed to do now?"

"Sneak in the back way."

"There is no back way," I say. "We have a *side* way." I point to the side gate that leads into my parents' backyard. It's adjacent to the neighbor's property, and the only way to get to it is to stroll right up our driveway (out of the question at the moment) or cross the neighbor's yard, hop *their* side gate, and then hop our fence.

Jan gives me a supportive pat on the back. "Piece of cake."

"Yeah, a three-hundred-pound piece of cake." I gesture at Ernie, who looks up

blearily, gives me the finger—and then proceeds to sneeze frosting. Or maybe it's just snot. It's hard to tell in the low light. Either way, I'm grossed out, and more than a little disappointed that after showing signs of improvement earlier, he's now looking like someone in the final throes of a bout of Captain Trips.

Jan and I get off my bike. We lower Ernie onto the ground, and, wiping my hands on my pants, I say to Jan, "Okay, you carry him and I'll carry the bike." (CPR tactics—never yell, "Someone call 911!" in the middle of a crowd, because everyone will be looking around at each other to see who "someone" is before that someone makes the call. Call out to a specific person, point to them, and give them a direct order: "*You*, call 911!" I saw it in a YouTube video, and I'm hoping the same rules will apply here...even if it's merely to appease the closet germ freak inside me.)

"Why do I have to carry the leviathan?" Jan asks.

Because if he sneezes on me one more time, I'm seriously going to go into hysterics! "You're the bodybuilder. You're used to lifting heavy things."

Jan frowns down at Ernie's mass. "But today's a rest day."

"Just pretend he's a giant barbell." I glance at Ernie as well. "Or several sacks of potatoes."

Jan looks less than enthusiastic, but doesn't protest any further as he squats, hefts Ernie over his shoulder, and stands again. "He's more like a sack of *mashed* potatoes."

We start across the neighbor's yard. There's a hedge between our properties—high enough for cover, but low enough that if I straighten fully and lift up my chin I can see Megalomoto and my parents. I watch them carefully, making sure they aren't watching me. Mom's standing between Megalomoto and his car; in order to get around her, he does this sneaky sort of brush-slash-caress maneuver, running his hand down her back and butt, obviously borrowing a page from Ben Schwartz's book during the cop-copping-a-feel scene at the beginning of *Coffee Town*.

And Dad's just standing there messing with his phone and pretending he doesn't know what's going on. I know he's pretending because if I can see Megalomoto's Gino move from the next house over, Dad sure as heck can see it standing *right there*.

"What are they talking to your grandpa about?" Jan whispers, his eight-bit physique trembling under Ernie's weight.

"He's not my grandpa," I reply, wondering if Jan didn't just see Megalomoto's groping, or if Czech grandpas pat their daughters on the butt during social occasions as handily as French people kiss each other on the mouth when saying hello or goodbye. More importantly: why does Dad put up with this? I mean, the obvious answer is that he puts up with it to keep his job, to keep the peace—to suck up to the man who can make him or break him. Or maybe he's cool with it. Oh, God—maybe *Mom's* cool with it. Maybe she's not as innocent and naïve as I'd once thought, but actually *likes* the way Megalomoto flirts with her.

I can't watch anymore. I lower my head and close the rest of the distance to the

neighbor's gate. I climb over first, alighting on the other side with reasonable dexterity and, resisting the temptation to inspect for meddlesome pets or zombie remnants of an Indian burial ground, signaling for Jan to pass my bike over. The over-the-fence part goes without a hitch, but for whatever reason, as I'm bending over to lay the bike down, my already-damaged cell phone decides to slip out of my pocket and tumble onto the ground.

The dark, unfamiliar, probably dirty, probably antibiotic-resistant ground.

I get down onto all fours and start feeling around.

Jan's voice, from above: "Are you ready?"

"No, hold on—" I look up over my shoulder—and the night sky is momentarily blocked out as a massive blob descends upon me, clobbers me, lays me out. I can't breathe; a musty-smelling soft bulk has enveloped me, is pressing into my every orifice like warm dough through the holes of a spaghetti strainer—

—someone farts.

I push Ernie off of me and lie on my back, gasping for air.

Jan's head appears over the top of the gate. "Theo?"

"Dude, I told you to hold on."

"I thought you said, 'Yo, throw on.'"

"Why would I say, 'Yo, throw on?'"

"Why do you Americans say a lot of the things you do?"

"I don't know—but one thing we definitely *don't* say is, 'Yo, throw on!'"

"Sorry. I'm bad."

I think he means, "my bad," but I don't have the breath to correct him.

## The Great Spandex Debate

**@jan**

The interior of Theo's house is nothing like the exterior. From the street, it's just another well-kept, two-story home in the nice part of town. But as soon as Theo lets us in the back way, I realize that Ernie isn't exaggerating all that much when he calls him a rich white boy (despite Theo's obvious Asian half). It's like stepping into some kind of fancy Japanese-themed resort—or the TARDIS booth from the *Dr. Whom* show my dad likes to watch in that this place can't possibly, *shouldn't* possibly *fit*.

"Are you sure this is the right house?" I ask.

"It's the right house," Theo replies.

"If you're Dr. Whom."

"Dr. Who."

"Dr. Whom."

"Dr. *Who*."

"Dr. *Whom*—you know, from TV?"

"No, I'm not asking *who*, I'm saying his name is 'Dr. Who,' not 'Dr. Whom.'"

"Really?" I think for a moment. "Is that grammatically correct?"

Theo looks flustered, glances warily around as if this is most certainly *not* his house. "It's his name. Take off your shoes."

I set Ernie down and follow Theo's example, taking off my shoes and putting them in the cubby beside the door. Then, hoisting Ernie again, I trail behind Theo as he tiptoes up the hallway. I've only ever downloaded into his bedroom; tonight I'm getting an improvised tour of the magnificent downstairs—and I'm beginning to see why he worries about everything all the time. In the event of a fire, tornado, flood, or other natural disaster, he stands to lose *so* much more than the average kid. Me, I have a futon and a dusty old desk in a corner of my parents' living room (at least, I *used* to). If I lose it all in a fire, few tears will be spilled. If this place burns down or blows away...well, the more that you have, the more that can go wrong, and the more that you worry about what can go wrong with your various things, so many *things* to be broken, lost, or stolen. It's the curse of affluence. And Theo, poor guy, he's got it bad.

The hallway runs through the heart of the house, with laundry, kitchen, and dining room off to the left, several other doorways leading into untold banquet halls on the right. In order to reach the stairs, we have to round the foot of the staircase, which faces the front door—the front door that, as soon as I wonder if

Theo's parents are still chatting outside, starts to open—

—Theo shoves me hard through one of the doorways to the right. We tumble inside, into darkness, Ernie flopping out of my arms onto onto the floor with a gelatinous thud. It feels like I'm kneeling on a gym mat; I can smell remnant incense lingering in the air. That, and Ernie's feet.

Quickly and quietly, Theo closes the door but for a crack.

Out in the hallway, his parents are talking:

"Why do we have him over?" Theo's dad asks.

"He's your boss," Theo's mom replies.

"So, I have to break bread with him, too?"

"Look at it as an opportunity. Most bosses never take the time to meet with their employees face-to-face."

"I'm perfectly fine with my boss being just a name on some business directory plaque, tucked safely behind a pane of glass instead of meddling in my after-hours or ogling my wife."

"Come on, Mike. He wasn't *ogling*."

"In denial this evening, are we?"

"He was being friendly, touching base."

"He was being *more* than friendly, Anya. And as for what he was touching..."

I crawl over to the crack in the door, negotiating space beside Theo with my shoulder, peering through, trying to focus my pixelated eyes, wondering: what's it like when a New Age couple argues? Will there be yoga moves? Interpretive dance? A calm and quiet written critique of each other's flaws drafted over herbal tea?

"He's a married man," Theo's mom says, and moves into the dining room, starts clearing the table.

Theo's dad follows. "Exactly. That's what married men do: they get bored of cooking at home, so they go after some take-out."

"Take-out?"

"You know."

"Not really, no."

"He's a fan of perky female bodies wrapped tight in form-fitting dresses, to say it plainly. You *know* what he was doing out there by the car, don't you?"

"You say it first."

"He was trying to cross the line."

"What line?"

"Your panty line."

"Foot in mouth, darling."

(I can feel Theo, pressed against me, tensing up suddenly—as if he's never heard his parents talk smack on their friends and coworkers before.)

"All I'm saying is, mixed messages," Theo's dad continues, kind of picking at the tablecloth while Theo's mom does most of the actual cleaning and clearing. "You know what dressing sheer means to a guy like Megalomoto."

Theo's mom looks annoyed. "Hang on. You're saying because my dress is sheer, my intentions are, too?"

"Okay, let me start again—"

"I'm proud of my figure. I work very hard for it. Now, I'm not going to wear a bikini to the dinner table, but neither am I going to hide myself away just because certain men confuse dressing flatteringly with dressing provocatively."

To and from the kitchen now:

"I'm not saying you're being provocative," Theo's dad continues. "The whole gym look thing is in. I get it. But there's a time and a place for the ol' sports bra and compression shorts combo."

"What's wrong with my Nike compression shorts?" Theo's mom asks. "I *love* my Nike compression shorts!"

"Yeah, but wearing them to the grocery store? In the car when you pick up Theo from school?"

"I dress for comfort."

"Ordinary, everyday sweatpants are comfortable."

"They're not what I like to wear."

"Because they don't conform to your every curve and crevice."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Spandex is the polite version of naked. Everyone knows that."

"Okay, wearing Spandex is *not* the same as going naked."

"You could spray-paint your bare buns and get the same effect. Just saying."

Theo's mom snickers. "Spray paint shorts wouldn't be shorts at all—you'd still be naked. Compression shorts have contour. They define, yes, but you still can't actually *see* what's underneath."

"You don't need to see what's underneath. You've already got the gist of it. That's the point."

"Gymnasts wear leotards. Wrestlers wear singlets. Swimmers wear Speedos. None are naked, and I don't think anyone would consider them exhibitionists."

"Because they're *supposed* to be showing off their bodies for reasons of scoring and presentation. Not one of them wears their competition uniform to the grocery store."

"Mike, the problem isn't the suggestion of a healthy breast or bottom that's facilitated by form-fitting sportswear, it's the lack of manners on behalf of the men who stare, the same men who'd stare at a woman's behind regardless of how she's dressed—and why are we even having this conversation?"

Theo's dad pauses for a second, then responds with, "I think I've had too much to drink—"

"Finally," Theo's mom interrupts, "something we can agree on."

"—but regardless, Spandex must die."

Theo shifts beside me. He's got this totally mortified expression on his face, made all the more exaggerated by the flickering glow of his broken cell phone, which he's holding up for light.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"My parents are fighting about *Spandex*," he replies.

Ernie stirs behind us. "Freaking...rich people."

# BU2B

**@theo**

Rush's "BU2B" goes off in my head.

Jan looks at me funny. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" I ask, swallowing hard.

"Someone's playing heavy metal music."

I slam my hands over my ears, somewhat concerned that they've suddenly become amplifiers, but more worried about what just happened in the kitchen. I've known for a while that Dad isn't a fanboy of Mom's liberal wardrobe—but it's always been a quiet insecurity, something mentioned in passing or hinted at through various humorous observations during Family Jogging Day. I've certainly never heard my parents argue openly about it before. Neil Peart's lyric is apt: "I was brought up to believe the universe has a plan." And now that plan has been altered forever. How long have these arguments been going on? Does this mean Dad's going to start sleeping in the guest room? Is Mom going to unfriend him on Facebook? Oh, God, will I eventually have to choose between the two of them in some kind of twisted *American Gladiator* revival custody battle while wearing a Spandex singlet and brandishing a pugil stick?

*Ahh!* I can't stop thinking about Spandex!

"You're freaking out again, aren't you?" Jan asks.

"BU2B" recedes in my mind, is replaced by the more subtle background hum of a thousand well-worn what-if's. "I'm not used to seeing my parents fight."

"It sounded more like they were just talking."

"Oh, they were fighting. Some parents yell and throw things. Mine tidy up together."

"That's not so bad. Mine shout at each other and then have very loud sex after."

Roused by the keyword "sex," Ernie shifts behind us and rasps, "That's so... fugging...Czech."

Jan frowns. "Did you hear something?"

"Just various background gasses," I reply, catching his sarcasm and smiling briefly before yielding to worry once again.

Jan notices this, and pats me on the shoulder. "Everyone's parents fight. That's what parents do: fight and have sex."

"Um...sure."

"Who's this Mr. Megalomoto anyway?"

"He's my dad's boss, my mom's highest-paying customer. He comes over for

every little sprain or headache just so he can hit on her. We only put up with him so that he won't fire my dad. And I'm designing a Web site for him." I pause. "I should sell the admin password to his enemies."

"Why doesn't your dad just quit if his boss is so bad?"

"He needs the job."

Jan nods knowingly. "My dad would probably torch his store if he could stand to lose the money."

"It's not the money." I think for a second. "Well, it *is* the money, I guess. Mom and I make more than enough to cover all our expenses. Dad's income is what goes into the savings account, or pays for any miscellaneous stuff. He'll never admit it, but staying with Mr. Megalomoto is his way of keeping his pride. He makes less than us, he took my mom's surname when they married, he does all the cooking—not that I'm saying any of that is uncool or anything. I just think my dad's having a hard time with it. Like, he wants to be this modern-day, trendy dad who lets his business-minded wife head the household with him as support, but his old-school upbringing won't let him live it down. His job is what makes him a father and a husband, and not just some dude living in my mom's house."

"That's deep," Jan says—the universal response to something heartfelt and meaningful that you've only partially understood.

I sigh and gaze through the crack in the door once more. My heart sinks when I see Mom and Dad are now tag-teaming the dining room with Windex, damp washcloths, and a mop. They're not exactly looking in our direction, but they will be when they see me and Jan struggling up the stairs with Ernie draped over our shoulders.

"We need a distraction," I whisper.

"I have an idea," Jan whispers back.

"Yeah?"

"Take off your clothes."

I face Jan, narrow my eyes. "*That's* your idea? Get naked? Really?"

Jan looks genuinely surprised. "It's late. You're supposed to be in bed, right?"

"Right."

"So, you pretend you just got out of bed. You take off your clothes and go into the kitchen for a drink of water. You keep your parents distracted—tell them you had a bad dream or something—and I'll sneak Ernie upstairs."

"Why do I have to be naked?"

"You don't have to be *naked*, just undressed."

"Same thing."

"No, undressed means you're in your underwear."

"*No*, 'in your underwear' means you're in your underwear. 'Undressed' means *un*dressed, as in the opposite of dressed."

A rare flicker of frustration tousles Jan's pixelated features. "Just strip down to whatever it is you usually wear to bed."

It's not the most eloquent idea, but it's an idea, and since I don't have a better one, I sigh and take off my socks and pants. Even though I've still got my Oxford

and boxers on, I'm grateful for the darkness.

"Here." I hand my clothes over to Jan. "Bring these with you upstairs."

He takes them hesitantly. "Wow. Do you always sweat this much?"

"Only when I'm doing urban crossfit."

A blank stare from Jan.

"You know," I add. "The eighty-two-foot-tall Donkey Kong platform thing. Biking across town with you and The Fatness. Fleeing from Axe Cop—never mind." I peek across the hall again. The moment my parents step out of sight and into the kitchen, I open the door full and motion for Jan to follow me out.

Almost immediately, Dad steps back into the dining room, resuming his mopping.

I flinch backward, shoving Jan (carrying Ernie again) into Mom's studio once more—and inadvertently nestling my backside in his lap. Just behind the threshold, safely in shadow, we both freeze in a stationary twerking position that's absolutely *not* as exciting as it sounds. I'm essentially the meat in an awkward sandwich. The first slice of bread would be Dad, across the hall and in the dining room, yes, but standing directly in my line of sight should he decide to look this way at the exact moment a freak power surge coaxes the studio lights to full brightness. The second slice of bread: pixelated crotch.

Jan clears his throat. "Uh, Theo?"

I step forward hastily, and my weight causes the floorboard—which has never, *ever* creaked before tonight—to do just that. Again I jerk backward and into a butt-crotch position.

(Dad looks up momentarily, but doesn't seem to see us.)

Jan clears his throat some more. "Yeah, it's happened again—"

Sweat now streaming down my face, I step forward, the floorboard creaking something fierce, and continue toward the dining room with conviction—not because the timing's right or anything, but because the universe will implode if I play snuggle-butt with Jan's lap a third time. Plain and simple.

I cross the hall, step into the dining room, my brain desperately rehearsing numerous convincing out-of-bed scenarios to tell my parents when something happens that defies all explanation: I slip and fall. Now, at the ripe old age of twelve, I've pretty much had this walking thing down for over a decade, on a variety of surfaces, both wet and dry, in and out of shoes. But tonight all it takes is a single bare foot placed incorrectly on a slippery wet tile floor, and suddenly I'm flailing toward the dinner table at Mach 6. I lash out with my arms to grab the nearest chair, the intention being to right myself and avert any further embarrassment. Instead, my shirt catches on the chair at about the same instant my legs go flying out from under me. In what has to be the most acrobatic fail of the year, my upper torso somehow shimmies right out of the shirt, resulting in my being deposited face-down onto the floor in nothing but my boxers and a slick, lemon-scented sheen of total shame.

Dad stops mopping and, after a lengthy pause, asks, "What on Earth are you doing, Theo?"

“Having a bad dream,” I reply.

# Lemon-Scented Ballsocks

**@beta**

Footsteps in the hall.

A door opens.

Closes.

Another door opens, closes.

Theo's bedroom door swings open, and in walks a low-quality JPEG version of the little dude's pixelated friend. Ernie's draped over his shoulder, has a pair of socks balled up in his mouth, and generally looks like the victim of some bad drive-through.

I wave. "Hey."

Jan waves back (he's got pants in his hand). "Hey."

I'm not quite sure what the protocol is for inviting someone into someone else's room, so we just sort of stare at each other until the door opens again, and Theo—wet, lemon-scented, half-dressed, hair all mussed—steps in. Closes and locks the door behind him. Stands beside Jan as if presenting to a panel of judges.

I wait for something to be said, for some small bit of context to be offered.

But sometimes you don't need context.

Sometimes things are just as messed up as they look.

## New Room

**@theo**

It takes me a sec to realize that the Asian hunk (purely a descriptive term) in track pants and a tank who's sitting straight-backed and cross-legged on the floor is Beta.

"Dude, two questions," I say.

"Sure thing," Beta replies, his attention split between me and my Wii. "Just let me hit pause—"

"What have I told you about hanging around my bedroom when I'm not here?"

"Never without underwear?"

"Well, yeah, that goes without saying. But I'm talking about the whole low-profile thing. You know, parents walking in? Unknown dude playing their son's Wii? Questions upon questions?"

"They'll never come in. They respect your personal space too much."

"Hardly! My mom *always* checks in on me now that I've lost my sight!"

"Yeah, but only when you're here, and only to bring you tea at bedtime."

"My point exactly."

Beta sighs. "Fine. Sorry. I'll stay virtual except for weddings and Comic-Con. Mostly Comic-Con. What's your second question?"

"Why do you look like a steroids version of Kevin Tran from *Supernatural*?"

"What, this?" Beta raises one of his ridiculously well-developed arms. "I finally made myself a custom skin. It's a mashup of my favorite actors, athletes, and physique models. What do you think?"

"You're, uh, into muscular men?"

"Naw."

"But you're wearing a muscle man skin."

"Strictly for the purpose of substitution."

"Substitution?"

Beta resumes his game (*Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*, I note out of the corner of my eye). "You know, when you watch a movie or see an attractive guy on the street, and you acknowledge that he's attractive without actually being attracted to him."

"That's a thing?"

"Everything's something."

"Even dudes skinning themselves as muscular other dudes."

"I'm comfortable in my own skin."

Jan, who's been holding Ernie this whole time, clears his throat. "Um, guys?"

I sigh, tasting lemon floor polish on my breath. "Yeah?"

"Where do I put the leviathan?"

"Just dump him on the—" Holy crap.

The floor!

I can *see* it!

My room is clean again. Cleaner than clean. *Immaculate*—as in not only have things been put back into their proper locations, the broken furniture has been repaired, blankets and pillows have been re-sewn, damaged CDs are now in their original shrink-wrap. It's as if Mini never ran amok at all.

"My room," I say. "It's...fixed."

Beta's eyes are glued to the TV. "I said I'd clean it, and I have."

Jan again: "Um, guys—"

"But the torn-up floorboards, the mountain of skulls—" I drop to my knees, peer under the bed. "—where's the mountain of skulls?"

"New Room, brah," Beta replies.

"New Room? As in New Room from the same company that makes New Eyes?" I swallow, standing again and wishing dearly I wasn't barefoot. "As in my room is now crawling from top to bottom with nanobots?"

"Dude, relax. New Room is far less complicated than New Eyes. The only thing that could ever happen with New Room is one of the little buggers gets a spot of carpet wrong. Which isn't an issue since you don't have carpet."

I wring my hands. "Have we learned *nothing* from the New Eyes incident?"

"Yes, there's the one-percent club, of which you're now a junior member, but that doesn't mean you should discount the other ninety-nine percent of what nanotech can do. Safe as flying, little dude."

Don't get me started on the flying versus driving thing! "Of *course* flying is safer than driving—if you do it a few times per year. If you fly several times per *day*, to and from work, to the grocery store, to your friend's house or whatever, flying is *way* more dangerous than driving."

"Interesting theory. We should totally crowdfund a study."

Asian half activated.

Glare brought to full power and aimed square at the side of Beta's face.

He winces. "All right. I get it. Bad blood between you and nanotech after your little New Eyes mishap and all. But you can't systematically close yourself off to each and every aspect of the world every time something goes wrong."

"*Little* mishap?" I throw my hands in the air. "I'm blind thanks to New Eyes!"

"You also got your sight *back* thanks to New Eyes, and you got a nifty pair of contacts out of the deal. And come on, you're a geek. You have to admit that nanotech, that this—" He gestures at the unblemished walls, the spotless floor. "—is pretty cool."

He has a point. I mean, it *is* cool having an army of tiny robots cleaning my bedroom for me. But it's also creepy. Very, very creepy. I know the bots are

supposed to regroup inside their applicator and deactivate after they're finished, but I can't help wondering if there are still a handful of them wandering rogue over my things, waiting to be hacked...waiting to hack *me*—

"Guys," Jan says, his latest attempt at getting somebody's—anybody's—attention.

"Oh, just dump him on the floor already," I tell him.

"Not that." He points at the window.

A smoldering, naked puppet is climbing awkwardly over the sill and into my room.

# Rock Paper Scissors Hong

**@jan**

"Huh," Beta murmurs. "Your puppet's got a dong."

The naked puppet—which I now realize is a badly-burned Mini—climbs-slash-tumbles the rest of the way into Theo's bedroom and does an awkward somersault onto the floor. He glares up at Beta. "Really? I stage a miraculous comeback after being left for dead at the side of the road, and the first thing out of the musclebound pretty-boy's mouth is a dong comment?" He picks a scorched thread from his shoulder, looks at Theo. "What's wrong with *you*?"

"I...I thought you were dead," Theo stammers.

"I know you did. Why else would you have left me to burn alive at the side of the road?"

Theo starts hemming and hawing apologetically.

"If I might interject?" asks Beta.

Mini looks at him.

"Why the plush wang?"

"Because Ken doll I am not!"

"Did you know the real Ken Handler was born with internal genitalia?"

Theo looks doubtful. "That can't be true."

"Serious. Look it up."

Theo starts arguing over whether or not Beta's invitation to Google Ken Handler's genitals is genuine or a bluff—but I tune out momentarily, my exhausted arms deciding to dump Ernie onto the floor of their own accord. He kind of sags and spreads out like a Hefty bag full of moist garbage. I stretch, fully appreciating that a weight has literally been lifted from my shoulders; I turn in place—

—and spot my reflection in mirror.

I hadn't been paying attention on the way in. I'd thought Theo had a piece of life-sized pixel art hanging on his bedroom door, but it's really just me. I look like some kind of ancient Atari artifact. Or maybe a SuperMegaNet junkie who's uploaded and downloaded so many hundreds or thousands of times over the years that the copies of copies of copies of myself have gradually lost all their clarity. This isn't like having a piece of food stuck in your teeth, or a splotch of toothpaste plastered on your shirt—people are going to notice. They're going to stare. They're going to take pictures with their phones and post them on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook—

"Does it hurt?" Theo asks, stepping beside me, his reflection almost as ludicrous as mine, what with the mussed hair, half-missing clothes, and sleek, lemony sheen.

"Everything feels...fuzzy," I reply. "Like leaves, or layers of construction paper." Or something like that. "You're good with computers. You can fix me, right?"

Theo looks at Beta.

Beta looks back at the TV.

Craps. I was afraid of that.

I clear my throat, point at Ernie. "What do we do about this one?"

"I don't understand," Theo says, looking grateful for the change of subject. "He was doing better when we were on our way home. How can his health have changed so drastically in such a short time?"

Beta faces forward again, resumes playing *Toad*. "Maybe he's allergic to something."

"Like what? Vegetables?" Mini chuckles to himself.

"Dude," Theo says. "This is serious."

Mini sighs. "Life is *always* serious."

"I may be old-fashioned in suggesting this," Beta says, "but what was it kids used to do back in the day whenever they found themselves in need of medical attention? Oh, yeah—they got their parents to take them to the ER."

"*Neh!*" Ernie wheezes, rolling onto his back and staring up at the ceiling with bloodshot eyes. "No parents! No doctors!"

"You kind of need both right now," Theo says.

"Don't we all," Mini murmurs, picking at another scorched thread (and making absolutely no effort whatsoever to get dressed).

Ernie beckons to Theo. "What I need right now is my friends."

Everyone glances at Theo.

Looking hesitant, he kneels beside Ernie.

Ernie takes his hand, says, in true melodramatic fashion, "So many things left undone, things left unsaid...the unshared wisdom of a life unlived. I never had a chance to leave my mark on the world..."

"Well," Mini offers, "if skid marks count—"

"They *don't*," Theo shoots back.

Ernie tilts his head, now staring bleary-eyed at a point somewhere just above Theo's shoulder. "I want you to do something for me after I'm gone."

Theo rolls his eyes. "Ernie, come on. It's probably just indigestion. You're not going to—"

"Promise."

"Ernie—"

"Promise!"

"Fine. I promise."

Ernie nods, satisfied. He rests his head back on the floor. "Pen...*blech*...paper."

"Right file cabinet, top drawer," Beta says.

"I'm on it." Mini toddles over to the file cabinet.

I can tell from Theo's expression that the top drawer of the right file cabinet is *not* where he usually keeps his writing utensils. He glares at the back of Beta's head as Mini returns from the cabinet, hands him a ballpoint pen, a spiral notebook. He takes them both, waits.

Ernie rasps, "Promise me that you'll...tweet these for me after I die."

"Dude, you're not going to—"

"First tweet: 'You are you. —Ernest Goodale #inspiration'"

"That's kind of cliché, isn't it?"

"Eat me. Second tweet: 'To nerd is human. —Ernest Goodale #TheGeekShallInheritTheEarth'"

"Saw it on a T-shirt the other day."

"Third tweet—"

"How many of these are there?"

"*Third tweet!*"

"Whatever. Third tweet."

"Find a banging picture of James Hong as David Lo Pan and tweet it with, 'You are not brought upon this world to get it!'"

"Who's James Hong?"

"Most underrated actor *evar*. Haven't you ever heard of rock-paper-scissors-Hong?!"

Theo narrows his eyes. "You made that up just now, didn't you?"

"Nuh-uh!"

"What are the rules, then?"

Ernie looks frustrated—constipated, too. "Isn't it obvious? Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, paper beats rock, Hong jumps over rock, paper beats Hong."

"How does paper beat Hong?"

"Paper cut!"

"What about scissors?"

"What about them?"

"Do they beat Hong, or does she beat them?"

"Doesn't matter!" Ernie screams. "#RockPaperScissorsHong!"

Theo sets down his notebook. "This is the lamest version of rock-paper-scissors I've ever heard."

"*You're* the lamest version of rock-paper-scissors you've ever heard!"

"You need an *odd* number of moves to make the game work. You just copied Sheldon Cooper's version of rock-paper-scissors-lizard-Spock from *The Big Bang Theory*, replaced Spock with James Hong, and left out the lizard. Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady are rolling over in their graves right now."

"Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady aren't dead," Mini points out.

"They would be if they knew what kind of crappy derivative hand games their fanboys are creating behind their backs."

"I don't know," Beta says. "*Big Bang* is good, but I've always been more of a *The IT Crowd* fan."

Theo flails his arms above his head. "Why are we even talking about any of

this?"

"Chill, hamster eyes," Ernie says. "You're not the one who's dying of fatness."

"Or terminal pixel art," Mini adds.

"Or who's into ancient Hollywood actors," I say.

"Or who's into retro, hairy-armpit beach babes!" Ernie retorts.

"Stay Puft Dough Boy!" I shout back.

"Dirty—" He means to say, "Dirty Czech!" but instead sort of splutters "*Chtheck!*" as one of his teeth pops out of his mouth and falls onto the floor.

Theo looks horrified. "Ernie?"

"Whath?"

"Was that a baby tooth?"

Ernie does a double-take, the enormity of what's just happened hitting him full. "Ah, shoot."

# Uncle Solo

**@theo**

"Doctor Pain? Really?"

"What's wrong with Doctor Pain? Doctor Pain's an awesome name."

"Yeah—if you're a boss in a video game." I glance around the online waiting room, empty but for me and Beta (Ernie's already been spirited away behind closed doors; we're just here to provide paperwork and currency). "Or a pro-wrestler."

"Dude," Beta says, "how can you not be okay with an online clinic run by someone named Doctor Pain?"

"Because 'Doctor Pain' doesn't sound like it has anything to do with relieving people's aches and pains. If anything, it's the moniker of some crazed comic book villain who *gives* you pain."

Beta raises an eyebrow. "Did you just use the word 'moniker' in a sentence?"

I pretend to be interested in a brochure stand across the way, hoping Beta will mistake my embarrassment for indifference. "That brochure says 'Cedar Cyanide Medical Group' on it."

"You're going to be *such* a muff whisperer once you hit high school."

"I'm already in high school."

"I meant physiologically."

"Just fill out the form." I gesture at the giant dialog box that's popped up beside Beta's seat. It's got some fine print, followed by a line of bold text that reads, "Check here if you are over 13 years of age and have read the Terms of Service."

Beta checks the box, clicks the "OK" button. The dialog disappears.

"Did you read the terms of service?" I ask, frowning.

"No need, since I'm breaking it anyway by putting myself down as Ernie's dear old Uncle Solo. Besides, I've got it memorized."

"The whole thing?"

"Doctor Pain's terms of service agreement is refreshingly up-front and to-the-point. 'You pay Doctor Pain. Doctor Pain heal your pain. You post review of Doctor Pain on Yelp. You not sue Doctor Pain as event of gross negligence.'"

"*That's* the terms of service?"

"A more grammatically-correct version, yeah."

"All of it?"

"Relax. I come here all the time."

"But you're virtual," I say. "How can you get sick?"

"I surf a lot of porn and warez sites."

"That explains *so* much."

"*Har-har*, little dude."

I lean back in my seat, tired. Beyond tired. Mustering every ounce of CBT training to keep myself from looking at the clock on the wall because, you guessed it, if I can convince myself it's only half past ten, then it's only half past ten, even though I know it's much, much later. Wednesday morning already. There's subtle electronica music playing in the background, a track called "Modern Beauty," by Ryan Farish, according to the minimalistic, jumbo-sized playlist that occupies an entire wall—though as much as this place was designed to look like some kind of slick Apple product, it's still just a waiting room, and waiting rooms suck. They're worse than getting the shot, worse than your doctor giving you the bad news. At least when you know you've only got three months to live, you *know*. You can prepare. The not-knowing, the suspense—the un-calm before the storm during which your brain entertains every little hypochondriac possibility regarding your sore this, your swollen that—*that's* the worst part about going to the doctor. Not the after, but the before. And sometimes the during, depending.

I slouch further into my seat, stretching my legs, groping mentally for less ominous thoughts. "Seems like the only time we hang out is when you're uploading with me to some doctor."

"Twice is hardly enough to establish a pattern," Beta replies. "Besides, we play Wii, like, every day, don't we?"

"*You* play Wii every day. I join in during occasional free time between homework and Web stuff."

A pale, middle-aged woman clearly afflicted with some sort of walking dead sickness uploads into the room, shuffles into a chair. Like Beta, she placates Doctor Pain's infamous terms of service dialog box without reading it first, and I have to wonder if anyone who uploads here reads anything.

"What do you think her problem is?" I whisper to Beta—*id est*, is she contagious?

"You don't have to worry about catching anything here." Beta waves his hand at the red McAffe shield hanging on the wall. "They've got anti-virus installed."

"Yes, but *McAffe*?"

"What would you prefer?"

"Avira. Or a hardened Linux box."

Beta snorts. "I doubt she's sick enough to warrant hard Linux. Besides, the day I go to a Linux-based clinic is the day I forgive the GNOME team for the orgy of inconsistency that is GNOME Shell."

"Excuse me," Zombie Lady rasps, looking annoyed, "but I can hear you."

"No worries, toots," Beta says, flashing her a friendly smile. "We're talking about the *other* patient zero who was here before you."

Zombie Lady looks like she wants to give Beta a piece of her mind (or maybe eat a piece of his), but instead looks the other way.

"We're going to fix that someday," Beta whispers.

"Fix what?" I whisper back.

"People like that."

"People in bad moods?"

"Sick people. Injured people. The resolution is there. SuperMegaNet can copy and paste people losslessly. We can give users the ability to change their virtual appearance using skins. The next step is to make those changes sticky, if desired, once a user is actual again. It's tricky, because what works well at the moment of upload may not work after several days, weeks, months, or years of routine cell division in the real world. We need computers smart enough and fast enough to be able to predict all possible mutations during a person's lifespan. But once we figure out how to tweak without tampering, this'll be the wave of the future. It'll revolutionize cosmetics, the medical field, social politics—upload to an online clinic like this, filter out your cancer, download clean as a Bloomingdale's restroom. Designer bodies instead of online skins. Instant vacations. The death of public transportation as we know it. Assuming this doesn't end with the government or some greedy tech company getting its grubby paws on Taurus' technology, on *me*. They'd love to patent a world where all you have to do is upload to a server, rearrange a few of your bytes, and send yourself back home once again, right as rain."

"Except," I point out, "Jan doesn't have the bytes available to rearrange, does he?"

Beta shrugs. "Like I said earlier, the SMN server is *supposed* to be graceful about download failures, but, well, it *is* still beta software. You're fidgeting, by the way."

"I get nervous when I'm tired."

"That's kind of an oxymoron, isn't it?"

If "oxymoron" is slang for "making your therapist rich," then yes. Absolutely. "I can handle it."

Beta pauses, makes a point of letting me know that he's studying me. "Call your parents, little dude. Call Ernie's grandparents. It's okay for you to turn the reigns over to someone else once in a while."

I shake my head. "No parents. I promised Ernie."

Beta sighs. "Look. I get it. I was ten once, too."

"Twelve."

"What?"

"I'm *twelve*."

"Ten, twelve—it's all underage in a court of law. I know you and your friends are trying to assert your independence, but you have a family. Your friends have families." Beta pauses. "Well, Jan's family has been impounded, but that's another discussion. I have a family I can't see because I'm supposed to be missing or dead. I've haunted their Facebook pages enough to know they've moved on without me. That's fine. I'm a wanted man. I miss them dearly, but I don't want to be dropping in on Mom and Dad every weekend, bringing my problems back home, opening old wounds and all that. What I'm getting at is, I *can't* be with my family. You *won't* be with your family. Think about it."

Okay, for the record, it's not that I *don't* want to be with my family. I just don't

want to be with them like other kids my age are with their families, always getting into trouble, always grounded, always being talked about by adults using sentences that end with exasperated sighs or a rolling of the eyes. More importantly, I don't want Mom and Dad to one day soon decide that I'm not big enough for my britches.

"I'm afraid that if I fail one too many times," I say, "my parents will blame it on the high school thing—too much too fast—and they'll send me back to middle school."

"What's so bad about middle school?"

"Bullies. Peer pressure. Social politics. Dances. Kids my own age."

"Doesn't sound all that different from high school."

"When you're a couple of years younger than everyone else it makes *all* the difference. In middle school, I was on everyone's radar. All the judging and the stereotypes and the awkwardness... In high school, I'm almost invisible. I'm of no interest to the girls, and I'm no threat to the boys. I'm not too small, I'm not too quiet, I'm not too smart, I'm not too Asian. I'm...anonymous."

Beta nods. "So, this is your Kobayashi Maru scenario."

"Are all your metaphors based on *Star Trek*?"

"Hey, *Trek* has a metaphor for everything."

(This is true.)

"Kirk wanted to cheat death," Beta continues, "so he reprogrammed the simulator to ensure he never faced death. You've reprogrammed your life to ensure you never face adolescence."

I fidget some more. "I wish I could just be as chill as you."

"Oh, I'm not so chill," Beta says in *the* most chill way possible. "I spend a good cumulative hour or two every day wondering if all the decisions I've ever made up to this point have been right or wrong."

"Dude. You're chill even when you're explaining why you're not."

Beta looks thoughtful. "Huh. Maybe there's a bug in one of the SMN algorithms that handles emotions or morality or something."

"Does that mean you might suddenly BSOD one of these days and start running around killing people?"

"I promise to kill you last."

Matrix promised Sully the same thing in *Commando*.

Look how that turned out.

"Mr. Solo?"

The two of us look up.

A comically big-breasted nurse is standing beside the now-open exam area door.

"The doctor will see you now," she says.

## Theo Downloads Pr0n

**@beta**

"Your nephew's dying," Doctor Pain says as Theo and I take a seat in his office.

Theo tries to look concerned, though I can tell he's trying even harder not to make it obvious that he's sneaking glances at the nurse's boobs as she leaves the room—a ridiculous move on his part considering how much of his manga collection is downright hentai. He's no stranger to oversized racks, luscious bottoms, and epic genitalia; he should be about as desensitized to Nurse Double-D's chest as your average American teenager is to cigarettes and excessive alcohol consumption. Instead, he's gone all fourth-grader.

For shame.

"So, what's the problem?" I ask Pain while nudging Theo in the side.

Pain scratches his non-existent beard, looks over Ernie's test results on his iPad. "X-rays, blood work, EKG...there's definitely some very bad stuff going on due to poor diet and a total lack of exercise. In a few years, it'll be diabetes, morbid obesity, heart disease. But that's not why Ernest is sick right now..." He trails off, raising his arms and literally grasping in the air as if for an explanation.

"Er, what are you doing?" I ask.

Pain blinks at me. "Stretching exercises. I like to keep limber." He pushes his iPad aside, clasps his hands, faces me full. "Anyway, as I said, a few years from now, I'll be able to tell you exactly why Ernest will be sick, but in the meantime, well, it's as if he's simply lost the will to live."

I exchange glances with Theo.

"*That's* it?" Theo asks. "*That's* what's wrong with His Puddingness? He just doesn't feel like living anymore?"

Pain shrugs. "Essentially, yes."

"So, you're saying it's all in his head."

"Essentially, yes."

Theo frowns. "Can we see him?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Is it, uh...normal for you to always repeat yourself like that?"

"Essentially, yes."

* * *

Cut to me and Theo standing side by side at the foot of Ernie's bed.

The little dude looks flabbergasted. "What. The. Heck."

My sentiments exactly. Ernie's looking bad. Real bad. Like, Michael Deighton at the end of the "Blood Brothers" episode of *The Outer Limits* bad. His eyes are sunken; his skin is pale and shriveled; his hair's fallen out; he's breathing in shallow gasps. We've asked the nurse to give us a moment alone so that we can stare dumbfounded, and that's exactly what we're doing.

"At least he's lost some weight," I say.

"He's lost *all* his weight," Theo clarifies.

"A Kardashian's wet dream. Agreed."

More staring. After a while, the door opens behind us. I glance over my shoulder, expecting Doctor Pain or one of his many buxom nurses. Instead, the little dude's talking puppet, dressed in scrubs, toddles into the room. He's still scorched underneath, but at least he's no longer naked.

I nod at Theo, pointing at the floor. "Your mini-me is here."

Theo turns and glares at Mini. "Why are you wearing scrubs?"

"When in Rome," Mini replies.

"What about Jan? Shouldn't you be back home, er, consoling him or something?"

Mini shakes his head. "Dude, when your brah comes down with a severe case of pixelitis, you don't stay there with him. That's the *worst* thing you can do."

"How is comforting someone in a time of need a *bad* thing?"

"Jan needs to feel like he's going to get better," Mini explains, putting on his best doctorly air. "He needs to feel that there's something to be done. Speaking from a psychological standpoint, if I just sit there with him, it's all kinds of awkward because unless I too am pixelated, there's absolutely nothing I can say or do that will make him feel better. It's just the two of us recycling the usual clichés. 'Don't worry. You'll get better. We'll figure this out. I'm sure it isn't permanent. I'm sure this won't affect your GPA.' But if I politely excuse myself under the guise of figuring out a solution to his problem, well, I've given him hope, haven't I? I've taken *action*. It doesn't matter if I'm just putting dingleberries in a bowl in the bathroom down the hall—his *belief* in my efforts will give him something to look forward to."

"Yeah—a bad smell afterward."

"No, dork. Motion. Momentum. Action."

Theo looks suspicious. "What kind of action?"

Mini makes a motion to be picked up. The little dude hoists him onto his shoulder, where he perches, studying Ernie and shaking his head. "Jesus. I've seen puddles of puke that look better than him." He studies Ernie some more. "Okay, I have a theory, but it's going to take a commitment from you."

Theo looks even more suspicious, but nods.

Mini goes on: "When did Ernie start getting better?"

"I don't know."

"Think."

After a pause, Theo says, "When he was watching porn, I guess."

"When did he start getting worse?"

"When he broke my phone."

"In other words, when he *stopped* watching porn, right?"

"Coincidentally, maybe—"

"Remember our little field test at the top of Mrs. Womack's eight-bit girder palace?"

"What field test?"

"We cued up some porn on your phone—"

"Where are you going with this?"

"If your friend was dying, would you do whatever you could to save his life?"

"I'd fight his grandma on top of an eight-bit girder palace," Theo says, "if that's what you mean."

"Follow me here. Would you spend your life savings?"

"*All* of my savings?"

"Is any human life worth a fixed amount?"

"Fine. Yes. Whatever."

"Would you sit bedside 24/7?"

"Sure."

"Would you slurp your friend's sausage?"

Theo momentarily forgets how to breathe. "Huh?"

"Seriously," Mini says. "Let's say he's really sick. Like, he has inoperable cancer or something, and he only has weeks, maybe days left, and his dying wish is for a blowjob from his best friend. Would you do it?"

"No!"

"Come on, it's his *dying wish*."

"Dude, no."

Mini shakes his head. "*Tsk-tsk.*"

"What? If he's really my best friend, then he wouldn't want *my* final memories of him to be of me doing something I'm not into—something he *knows* I'm not into."

"It's no different than donating a kidney."

"It's *very* different!"

"Okay, what if his dying wish is to give *you* the blowjob?"

"No—no oral sex! No sex of any kind between me and another dude!"

"Okay. Consolation prize. Would you let him watch porn on your phone?"

"I, er...I guess. If that's what he wanted." Theo clears his throat. "Again, where are you going with this?"

Mini shrugs. "Oh, nowhere. I just wanted to start with something audacious first so that when I asked you to download porn it would seem tame by comparison." He holds up Theo's phone. "Cue up some skin, *por favor*."

Theo looks none too pleased as he takes his phone, swipes, starts tapping out his passcode—and does a double-take. "My phone! It's...in one piece again!"

"Dude, SuperMegaNet," Mini and I reply, both at once.

"But I thought you said the whole upload a blond, download a brunette thing

was still in the works."

"Cell phones are easy," I reply. "It's humans and baby seals that are tricky."

Mini tugs at Theo's shirt. "Porn, please."

"*This* is Ernie's dying wish?" Theo exclaims. "For me to download porn for him?"

"To you and me, it's just porn, but to Ernie, well, somewhere along the Goodale/Womack evolutionary line the libido got crossed with the digestive system. Ernie's incessant eating is the result of generations of unnatural selection. He eats food to feed his libido, and consumes porn to feed his body."

Theo pays Ernie another glance. "That actually makes more sense than it should."

Mini looks pleased. "Of course it does. You and I are pretty sharp when we want to be." He nods at me. "Now, if you'll excuse us."

"Oh, don't mind me," I reply. "I'm a fly on the wall."

"It's nothing personal. It's just the whole creepy grown man watching porn with kids thing—"

And I'm out the door.

**@theo**

This is dumb. This is *not* going to work. I know what's going on here: Ernie's dying wish isn't to watch porn on my phone, it's to embarrass me by making me *think* he wants to watch porn on my phone, and he's somehow coerced Mini into going along with it. I try to be helpful, and before you know it there are reaction videos of me watching porn circulating on the Internet. People will laugh at me on the street; prospective employers will do background checks and find nothing but numerous, looping videos of me getting all hot and bothered over random Internet couples having miscellaneous sex—

"What's the delay?" Mini asks impatiently. "It's not rocket science. Pick something."

"All right, I'm looking. Don't rush me!" A bead of manga-styled sweat trickles down my forehead. I don't want to yield to the joke, but neither do I want to be blamed for Ernie's death should Mini's unnatural selection theory pan out. The path of least resistance is to simply browse Ernie's history, which is all dirty URLs, and a few sites with genitalia-rhyming domain names. I tap at random and move beside Ernie's bed, quickly aiming the phone at him as soon as the video starts playing. A man and woman stumble through an introductory minute or two of unbelievably bad dialog, then they start doing their thing...

...and a change comes over Ernie. It's like someone's switched from blue LED murder light to warm incandescents. It's like a window being opened to let a spring breeze into a stuffy classroom. It's trying Del Taco's dollar menu for the first time after years of subsisting on Taco Bell's highly-subjective equivalent. The color's returning to Ernie's face; his breathing has steadied; his eyes, opening a crack and

focusing on the phone, are no longer bloodshot.

This can't be.

And yet it is.

"I'm really proud of you," Mini says, "and am pleasantly surprised that you uploaded so readily considering Jan's recent bad luck. You've got balls." He winks. "And shaft."

I swat him away—

"Theo?"

—and freeze on hearing Eva's voice cutting through the carnal mix.

Of course.

SuperMegaNet.

Always (friggin') on.

Under the circumstances, logic suggests I should keep the phone aimed away from my face so as not to incriminate myself, but what does Idiot Horndog Theo do? He immediately turns the phone around to look at the screen and confirm that Eva has indeed messaged him—in the process framing himself, both literally and figuratively. Yep. There's Eva all right, all groggy and bedraggled in her little SuperMegaNet window. Understandably, she's got major WTF all over her face.

"Theo," she sighs, "are you watching porn *again*?"

I jab my finger at my phone's touchscreen, trying to stop the video, suddenly forgetting everything I know about user interfaces, and somehow opening a slew of other SMN windows all at once—and the horror washes over me as I realize that Eva and everyone else on my buddy list is now peeking at their respective phone and wondering why l33t_master is watching therapeutic porn on a school night.

My brain farts audibly, instinct kicks in, and I desperately try to provide context using the only words at my disposal, those same tried-and-untrue words used the world over in situations of underaged drinking, drugs, sex, and overall shenanigans:

"It's for a friend, I swear! *It's for a friend!*"

## Suspected Crush

**@eva**

Theo suddenly appears beside my bed. It looks as if he's accidentally downloaded himself into my room by hitting buttons on his phone at random.

I'd been half asleep, but now I jolt upright, scooting into a sitting position with my back against the headboard, my knees tucked against my chest. With one hand I hold the blanket up to my chin; with the other I aim my phone light at Theo. "*Ew!* You did *not* just download into my bedroom while watching porn!"

"Huh?" Theo blinks in the semi-darkness, and sort of creates his own real-time fail video, stumbling away from the bed and across the room, tripping, and falling into Jack Skellington and Co. He takes down my entire collection with a muffled gasp and a soft thud.

"Theo?" I whisper, muting my phone entirely so as to banish the sounds of nookie still blaring from his phone on the other end.

"Um, yeah?" he whispers back, lying crumpled between Jack and Sally.

"What in the *world* are you doing?"

Theo sighs. "Oh, just having some kind of twisted nightmare. Before Christmas."

I reach beside my bed and flick on the lamp. "Har-har. Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"I need to get my robe."

"What for?"

"Um, hello? Bedtime, underwear, unscheduled boy in my bedroom, etcetera?"

Theo blushes, looks away. "Oh, right."

Watching Theo to make sure he doesn't peek, I quickly get out of bed and pad over to the door. I grab my bathrobe from the hook and slip it on, cinching the waist. "You can look now."

Theo nods, gets to his feet. "Uh, sorry for waking you up. I guess I'll be getting back."

I fold my arms and give him a smirk. "Back to watching porn and breaking into your friends' bedrooms at four in the morning?"

"Don't tell me what time it is!" Theo hisses miserably, covering his ears. "I'm not supposed to know what time it is!" He crumples back into the *Nightmare* pile.

"Sorry," I say, and sit at the edge of my bed. "I forgot about your BLT—"

"CBT."

"—or whatever you call it."

Theo sighs. "That's okay. I guess it could be worse."

"Yeah?"

"It could be *five* in the morning."

"So," I yawn, "since when are you an obsessive-compulsive porn addict?"

Theo shifts into something vaguely resembling a sitting position. "Ernie's dying wish was for you to catch me downloading porn on my phone."

"Ernie's still pretending he's dying?"

"I don't think he's a good enough actor to pull off what I saw in that hospital bed."

Wait—the *hospital?* "Ernie's in the hospital?"

"It's more of an online urgent care kind of place."

"For real?"

"For real."

Huh. "All right. Let's say, theoretically, that Ernie's really sick, and that, theoretically, I'm worried about his well being. What's the matter with him?"

"He wasn't inhaling enough food or watching enough porn or something. But he seemed to be getting better right before I, uh, downloaded on accident."

"Porn. Seriously."

"See for yourself." Theo points at my phone.

Keeping the volume muted, I pick up my phone, peek at the screen. Ernie's sweaty, flushed face fills his SMN window. He seems to be concentrating intently —on what, I'm pretty sure I don't want to know. "He looks like his usual bloated self."

"That's because he's watching porn."

"Prescription porn. On your phone."

Theo shakes his head in shame. "On my phone."

"How is that even a thing?"

"The doctors said there wasn't anything physically wrong with him, and that it was all in his head, but Mini suggested—"

"Wait, *Mini*? That little doll version of you that came to visit me earlier?"

"He came here?" Theo swallows hard. "I mean, er, doll? What doll?"

"The one that dropped by unannounced and said that Ernie was sick, and that you liked me. Then he showed me his penis. That was a joke, right?"

Theo looks like he wants to die. "I'm *so* sorry. He's this...weird kind of, uh, perceptive flux manifestation thingie. He says he's supposed to represent my suppressed ego or whatever. I don't see the resemblance. If anything, he's more like a miniature, non-fat yogurt version of Ernie. Only instead of food, he's got girls and sex on his mind 24/7."

Uh-*huh*. "Was he telling the truth?"

"About what?"

"When he said you have a crush on me—is that true?"

Theo stumbles to his feet. "I should get going."

"*Do you have a crush on me?*" I ask again, suddenly very interested in the topic for no discernible reason.

Theo shifts from foot to foot; he nibbles his lip, picks at one of his cuticles.

And oh, my gosh, even without the immediate awkwardness, it all seems so obvious now. Well, I guess it's *always* been obvious, hasn't it? I just never paid any attention, never even thought to look at Theo as more than a classmate or casual friend. I was always too busy trying to get Jan to notice me. At my old middle school, I had several crushes on several boys—but none of them ever returned the interest. They made fun of my eyes, or my resolutely flat chest—or they ignored me altogether. This is my very first crush *from* a boy rather than the other way around—and it's from Theo, of all people. Little someone's-younger-brother-looking, plush-doll-carrying, computer-programming, Glass Hammer-fanaticizing Theo.

Okay. Not that I'm even considering considering it at this point, but...what if? I picture a thought bubble above my head, and in that thought bubble Theo and I are together at the mall, the movies, holding hands, maybe kissing, and I'm thinking dating Theo might not be so bad. Then suddenly the thought bubble wavers, and the two of us are crammed in a bathroom stall, and we're doing all the naughty, scandalous things I've been wanting to do with Jan, and—

—so, *so* wrong.

"Listen, Theo," I say, clearing my throat, forcing the naughtiness to the very back of my mind. "I'm super glad that you're my friend. Really. But I'm just not interested in dating right now."

Theo continues to nibble his lip, which starts bleeding. "You like Jan."

Heck yeah, I like Jan—or *any* boy, for that matter, who's older, bigger, more mature-looking, and has a prize at the bottom of his cereal box. "He doesn't like me."

"Still."

"It takes two to make a thing work."

"*Still.*"

Ah, crap. I was hoping Theo would go all bashful on me, and that would be the end of it, but he's standing his ground. "Yeah, I like him. But I can't make him like me back, so it is what it is, I guess. He's my friend. You're my friend. Ernie's...some kind of gaseous anomaly. I don't know how I would've gotten past that first week of high school without you guys. I care for you. Just not in that way. You know?"

Theo shrugs without conviction. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I'm not one of those creeps who's going to stalk you until you say yes. I can act mature about this."

Regardless, there's blood trickling down his chin.

"Let me clean you up," I say, sighing and getting to my feet. I grab a cotton pad and some witch hazel from my dresser, then motion for Theo to sit beside me at the edge of my bed. I moisten the pad, dab it against his chin, his mouth. Nice mouth, I guess. Not as full and pouty as Jan's, but nice now that I'm noticing it. And those big brown eyes—and that absolutely smooth complexion. I may not be swooning with passion, but I will admit to being jealous.

Finishing up, I replace the witch hazel on the dresser, toss the used cotton pad into the wastebasket, and return to the edge of the bed—and before I realize what's

happening, I'm saying, "Okay, how about this: a simple test. One kiss. No tongues. If it's a creepy little brother kiss, we go our separate ways and never *ever* speak of it again. If, on the other hand, it's *not* an incest kiss, then…well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Agreed?"

Theo swallows, stammers, "Are you sure? We don't have to—I mean, it's okay if you just…I mean—"

I cup my hand over his mouth and close my eyes, puckering up. "Whenever you're ready, Casanova."

"Mmf."

I remove my hand and await first contact—which Theo clumsily makes, first with his nose, then with his forehead.

"Ow!" I pull back, opening my eyes and glaring at him.

"Sorry," he apologizes.

"Do over." I close my eyes once again, and this time it goes better. Our lips actually meet, and we kiss, briefly, politely before separating and looking at each other expectantly—

—I shrug and get up. "Nope. Little brother."

Theo does likewise. "Agreed."

"Sorry."

"No worries."

"See you at school."

"Yep."

I grab my phone and tap the "send home" button.

Theo winks out of the room.

That was my first kiss, I think to myself. My first semi-serious, boy-girl kiss, anyway.

And I gave it to Theo.

# The Spunkening

**@theo**

I should've uploaded back into Ernie's hospital room, or back to my bedroom, but instead I'm at this dinky taco stand out in the middle of absolute nowhere. Like, it's literally nothing but dirt, tumbleweeds, and cactus stretching all the way to a tentatively brightening horizon. At first I think there's been some kind of mistake—then I spot Beta, Ernie, Jan, and Mini seated at the cramped counter, and I realize that they must have come here while I was at Eva's.

On noticing my arrival, everyone claps politely.

Beta starts strumming Bob Seger's "Night Moves" on an acoustic guitar.

"What, er...what?" I ask, not sure if I'm referring to the taco stand, the guitar performance, or the fact that everyone's regarding me as if I've just gotten some kind of promotion.

"'Night Moves,'" Beta replies. "Dean played it for Sammy that morning he found him and Piper in the backseat of the Impala, and now I'm playing it for you."

Again, "What?"

"You kissed Eva," Mini explains. "She kissed you back. All was made right in the world."

"I mean, yeah, we kissed, but it was just—wait, how do you know about me and Eva?"

Ernie, whose giant, Cartman-like butt has poked its way out of the back of his flimsy hospital gown, holds up my cell phone. "We watched while I was being discharged."

I scowl, grab my phone from him—but before I can scold him (and the others) for the blatant voyeurism, the group absorbs me via a flurry of high-fives and pats on the back. And ridiculous chatter:

"So, when's the first date?"

"Will she be moving into your place or you into hers?"

"Don't worry about the stains. That's not your real cell phone, it's just a virtual copy for the purpose of curing Ernie."

"What's the baby's name going to be?"

"Bathroom? Just go behind a tumbleweed—no, that one, with the roll of toilet paper next to it. Watch out for wild wienerfoxes."

"Was she on top, or were you? Because I've read that certain positions are better for..." That last comment is from Ernie, who trails off when he realizes we've all

stopped talking and are now staring at him. "What? I'm just saying what everyone's thinking."

"*I* wasn't thinking that," Beta says.

"Neither was I," Jan also says.

Mini hesitates. "I was—but only a little bit."

Jan parts from the group to relieve himself amongst the tumbleweeds and wienerfoxes.

I wriggle my way back to the edge of the group, pretend to be interested in the ancient, grease-spattered laptop sitting at the far end of the counter. Its webcam is aimed at a tacky, equally grease-stained handwritten sign: SUPERMEGANET USERS WELCOME!

Momentarily, a middle-aged, thickly-mustached Mexican dude wipes his way down the counter. Between copious squirts of Windex, he nods at us, says to Ernie, "*Buenos días, mi gordito.*"

"Buenos Aires, Tacoman," Ernie replies. "The usual, please. And something special for my friends."

Tacoman (almost certainly not his real name) nods, scratches his back with his spatula. "*Si*. I make heart attack for you, and map to hospital *con carne asada* for *tus amigos*." He turns, wipes his way back up the counter.

"Buenos nachos," Ernie says.

I shake my head.

"What?"

"I can't believe you have a taco dealer."

"He does good work."

"He also calls you his little fatty."

Ernie blinks. "No, he doesn't."

"*Mi gordito* means 'my little fat one' in Spanish."

Ernie blinks again, considering. Then, "That's reverse racism!"

"All racism is racism," Beta points out.

"No!" Ernie screams. "Racism is knocking another race just because they're another race. *Reverse* racism is knocking another race because you assume they're knocking *your* race."

"That would be preemptive racism."

"Revenge racism," Mini adds.

Ernie frowns. "Whatever you call it, he's being it!"

"Maybe," I say, "he's being reverse racist because you keep calling him Tacoman instead of taking the time to learn his real name."

"Fug him. Fug you." Blinking warily at Jan, who's back from his bathroom break, Ernie asks, "What did I miss while I was under?"

"Jan got pixelated," I reply.

"So, that's what that is."

"And his apartment was towed."

"It's about time." Ernie looks unsurprised. "What else?"

Beta nods at Mini. "Little dude's got a doll."

"Oh, and Theo beat up your grandma," Jan adds.

Ernie nods appreciatively at me. "Thanks, hamster eyes. I owe you one."

"Uh...you're welcome, I guess," I say, wondering if I'm the only one who thinks any of the aforementioned shenanigans are the least bit weird.

"Seriously," Ernie continues. "I owe you. You downloaded porn for me."

"Whatever."

"That means we're friends forever." He holds out his hand.

I sigh and slap it. "Don't mention it."

**@mini**

"All right," I say to Theo. "Enough touchy-feelies. It's time."

"Time for what?" he asks, playing dumb. "It's almost dawn. There's, like, an hour left before I have to get ready for school."

"There's still the matter of your spunk."

He frowns. "What about it?"

"Um, hello? The agreement we made at Ernie's grandma's?"

"I was hanging from the top of an eighty-two-foot girder palace!"

"A promise is a promise."

"Yeah, but under the circumstances, I think a postponement is in order."

"This is only the beginning. You keep suppressing your spunk and there'll be worse things down the pipeline. Things involving stolen vehicles, flaming convenience stores, excessive use of smarty-pants words like 'postponement.'"

"What does my spunk have to do with any of that?"

I glance over at Beta, who's explaining the intricacies of SuperMegaNet technology to Ernie and Jan while Ernie pokes at Jan's pixelated form with a plastic spork. Assured that we've got a moment of relative privacy, I toddle up Theo's arm and whisper into his ear, "Remember a few months ago when you were taking your morning shower, your first *extra-long* morning shower?"

Theo blushes. "Yeah."

"That was the beginning—*my* beginning. That's why I'm here. Like it or not, you've just dived headfirst into puberty. Like it or not, my power grows with each passing day, and if you keep suppressing me you're going to explode like Emil Antonowsky in *Robocop*."

Concern crosses Theo's face. "Wait, really?"

"Well, maybe you won't *explode*," I say, ignoring the temptation to lie outright, "but you'll certainly run the risk of becoming one of the tweenage undead, an animated body without a single spark of life inside. You'll spend your high school years lurching around the Boca Linda cafeteria, trying to hit on girls, but instead just drooling on their boobs and leaving behind fetid chunks of flesh in their Jell-O fruit cups."

Theo looks totally grossed out.

Good—that means I'm getting to him. "Come on. It's really no big deal."

"If that's true, then let it drop."

"Hello—I'm your spunk. The only way I let it drop is if your wiener gets mangled in some kind of freak dressing room zipper accident."

Theo hangs his head, mutters something under his breath.

"What?"

"*I don't know how.*"

"You don't know how to what?"

"I don't know how to...you know...unleash my spunk."

"You mean...you've never...?"

"No."

"Not even *once*?"

Theo shakes his head.

"Why the hell not?"

"I...have this thing."

"This isn't about you somehow depleting all your *qi*, is it?"

"Well, a little bit, yeah. But the main reason is, I've, er, always been afraid that I might lose control and...spontaneously combust."

OMFG. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"Where did you get a ridiculous idea like that?"

"*Coast to Coast AM.*"

I might have known! "No—heck no. There's no way I'm letting George Noory and his super-beta prostate disinform you into keeping your action figure in its original packaging for the rest of your life." I grab Theo by the hand and pull him toward Tacoman's crusty laptop.

"Where are we going?" Theo asks.

"Yeah," Beta says, noticing our exit. "Where are you guys going?"

"Home!" I reply.

"Aw, stick around. We're going to see *The Force Awakens* after we eat."

Theo starts to say something, but I respond on his behalf, cutting him off: "And I'm going to see that Theo's Force awakens this instant!"

I click the "send home" button, and we're back in Theo's bedroom. Wordlessly, I walk him out into the hall. He faces the bathroom door at the other end. "You can do this," I reassure him after whispering a few last-minute instructions into his ear.

"I can do this," he whispers back.

"The sleeper must awaken."

"The sleeper must...are you quoting *Dune*?"

"Not important." I give him a firm shove toward the bathroom.

He takes a tentative step, then another, followed by another—all the way down the hall and to the bathroom door, where he stops, glances one last time over his shoulder.

I mouth the words, "You can do this."

He goes in, closes the door behind him.

I make my way down the hall and sit on the floor beside the bathroom door. It's quiet on the other side. At first I'm thinking that's because of good walls, but after several minutes I start wondering if Theo hasn't just fallen asleep on the toilet bowl.

Then I feel it.

The silvery link between us, trembling like a plucked guitar string.

An animated GIF of the original *Pong* fills my head, with a pixelated ball being whacked back and forth, back and forth. The image shifts, becomes security camera footage showing an impeccably-dressed business executive loosening his tie during an interview with a gorgeous young intern whose breasts are on the verge of popping out of her blouse. Then I'm watching Goten from *Dragon Ball* flexing mightily as he goes all Super Saiyan. "Movement 4" from Vangelis' *Mythodea* has just been cued to about 12:30, and is now blasting out of invisible amplifiers. The floor starts to tremble, the windows rattle, a framed picture crashes to the floor—

—then something totally and completely unexpected happens: Theo's Mom comes rushing out of her bedroom, confirming that one, she's the world's greatest underwear model, and two, she's clearly misinterpreted Theo's spunkening as some kind of raucous California quake. Bathroom doors are flung carelessly open; half-asleep mothers are frozen in place; shell-shocked, Goten-cosplaying versions of darling little sons are presented standing buck naked at innocent vanities with plush Dragon Ball earrings hanging from freshly-pierced right ears, poly-gloved hands poised above heads, about to start working highlights into newly-teased, windblown hairstyles—

—Theo's mom yanks the door closed, lurches backward and slams against the opposite wall as if she's been drop-kicked in the abdomen.

Vangelis fades; the earthquake subsides.

"Oh, my," she murmurs, invoking the universal phrase used the world over to encompass every tumultuous thought that no doubt goes through a mother's head when she sees her son's spunk in horrifyingly crystal-clear, high-definition detail for the first time.

Straightening, she clears her throat and, with as much dignity as one can muster while bleeding from the eyes, retreats into the safety of her bedroom, locking the door behind her.

# Post-Traumatic Spunk Disorder

**@mini**

I push the bathroom door open.

Inside, Theo's put his clothes back on...more or less (his shirt's inside out, and his pants look like they've found extra joints and crevices between his knees and hips). He's kneeling slumped over the toilet bowl. His unhighlighted hair is mussed, his Dragon Ball limp. There's vomit running down his chin.

"What the hell happened to you?" I ask, making my way to Theo's side.

"I threw up," he mumbles, dazed, half asleep, strung out on endorphins and rich, potent embarrassment.

"*Mazel tov.*"

"I'm going to die."

"No, you're not."

"I mean, what kind of mom *forgets to knock* in this day and age?"

"Yours, apparently."

Theo lifts his head from the bowl, glares at me with bloodshot eyes. "I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"You *suck*."

"Dude, lots of guys get caught upgrading. Fact of life. Rite of passage. You've just earned your first spunk merit badge."

"I didn't just get caught *upgrading*." Theo rests his head on the toilet again. "She saw everything. Moms aren't supposed to see their sons' everything once the diaper years are over and done with." He spits; a viscous thread of saliva and puke hits the inside of the bowl with a loud *plop!* "Oh, this is it. The is the end of all life as we know it. I'm going to hell. Mom's going to therapy. Dad will probably drive his car through a convenience store window or jump off a bridge or something."

"Okay. You very well may be the only dude in the entire world whose spunk created some kind of socially apocalyptic nightmare, but there's a silver lining here: you've now scored three out of three on your mom's parental checklist."

Theo lifts his head and looks at me suspiciously. "What parental checklist?"

"You know," I say, "the three basic things every parent wants for their son: good grades, wholesome friends, healthy spunk."

"I highly doubt my parents have a checklist on which my spunk is an item."

"Oh, but they do. It's not a physical checklist. It's not something they've scribbled on a piece of paper and stuffed into their wallet or purse between their

driver's license and health insurance cards, but it exists all right. Your parents, like all parents, want to be grandparents someday, and your spunk is the delivery system through which their future offspring will be released-to-manufacturing. So, naturally, they have a deeply vested interest in its working state."

"Enough about my spunk."

"Second silver lining, then—"

"Mini, no more silver linings, please—"

"—ever since the New Eyes incident, you've been having to deal with your mom's excessive mothering, her continuous butting into your business, looking over your shoulder—trying to keep tabs on her darling little boy. Except now her little boy isn't so little anymore. Now he's a hormone-ridden preteen taking long showers and hanging dong whenever possible."

"Your point?"

I kick Theo in the shin. "You've got your privacy back, dork. I can guarantee you from here on out your mom will never, *ever* enter your bedroom without knocking or making an appointment first—"

"—because she's now going to assume I'm getting naked and/or masturbating furiously every time my door's closed! It doesn't matter if I'm doing homework or listening to Asia or gaming or just taking a nap, the image in my mom's head will always be the version of me she saw in the bathroom today."

"That's a *good* thing."

"No, the fact that instead of thinking about my New Eyes my mom will now be thinking about my spunk is *not* a good thing."

"You're missing the fine print. Your mom witnessing your spunk means she's got you. But your witnessing her witnessing your spunk means you've got *her* too. She's just as embarrassed as you are. Think about it: she saw the door closed, she saw the light on, she didn't bother to knock—she can't tell the story to anyone without making a fool of herself in the process. Hence, she'll never, ever bring it up. You're off the hook."

For the first time, something like hope flickers behind Theo's eyes. "I never thought of it that way."

"Obviously. Now, hand me a washcloth."

"What for?"

"I seem to have stepped in some puke."

# 4 – 7 Hz

**@theo**

Like when your friends talk about you when they think you're asleep:

"Pre-dawn nachos are the best kind of nachos." *Fart!* "Where's Theo's crapper again?"

"Out the door and to the left."

"See y'all in twenty, then. I'm about to give birth to a food-baby."

"Food-baby?"

"What, people don't take atomic dumps in Brno, Janny Boy?"

"Not radioactive ones, no. Maybe in Chernobyl."

"That's nice—now out of my way before I soft-serve all over the floor…"

"Wow. Look at him. I've never seen the little dude so tuckered out."

"Airing out your spunk will do that."

"What now?"

"While you guys were at the taco stand, Theo's mom walked in on him while he was in the bathroom. She saw everything."

"Fate worse than death."

"Years of therapy for PTSD—post-traumatic spunk disorder"

"Whatever. Have you seen European TV shows? It's just nude friends and family having breakfast, sharing the shower, stumbling into each other at all hours of the night. They sleep naked, take their tea naked, they do the laundry naked, and have long, drawn-out conversations while having sex naked."

"They do not."

"Jan, back me up."

"I don't watch a lot of TV, to be honest."

"Doesn't matter. We're a modern American family. Nudity is something that's only permitted behind closed doors or a tightly-drawn shower curtain."

"Which is probably why Theo sees that therapist once a week. But that's a whole other discussion."

"Right. Can you do anything for Jan? It's going to be twenty kinds of awkward sending him back home all pixelated."

"If I even have a home anymore."

"I still can't believe they towed your apartment."

"That's the city for you. A hundred bucks says they put up a mini-mall where your digs used to be and deny there was ever any wrongdoing."

"Really?"

"Don't listen to Beta. He likes to exaggerate. About Jan's missing bytes, if you please."

"It depends on how they were lost during transfer. They may be gone, they may be sitting on an SMN server somewhere, marked as deleted by the file system, but not yet overwritten. Trouble is, the more time passes, the more likely it is your bytes *have* been overwritten."

"So, this is it, then. I'm stuck like this."

"Let's not hit the power button before the game's over. Let me look at the error logs, nose around the Taurus servers a bit. I just don't want to pull a Jen Barber and tell you I speak Italian when really I'm just winging it so that people will pay attention to me."

"Who's Jen Barber?"

"Oh, for God's—come hell or high water, at *some* point today we're binging on *The IT Crowd*. In the meantime, I'm sure Theo won't mind me adding a few more hard drives to my rig over here so that I can set up a personal server for you to chill on until we figure this all out."

"You want me to live on a computer?"

"You said it yourself, your apartment's been towed, your parents are MIA. Unless you want to bum around town *in pixelatia* or do the orphanage thing, going virtual for a while is probably your best bet."

"Wow. Most responsible adults would contact a relative, or the police, or Child Protective Services."

"Sarcasm? Or are you just coming down with a sore throat?"

"Oh, and *in pixelatia* isn't a real phrase."

"Dude, Mini. It's Latin for 'in pixels.'"

"Says who?"

"Unimportant. Look, Jan. I may be biased because of how shabbily the government has treated me since the Taurus Labs fiasco, but I say go virtual, lay low for a while. Install a skin—it'll look and feel like the real thing, and you can wear it when you're actual, too. Granted it'll only work when you're in range of an appropriate Wi-Fi hotspot or a cell phone with SuperMegaNet installed, but at least it'll let you walk around the 'hood without looking like some kind of *Minecraftian* cosplay gone bad."

"I guess...but is it safe?"

"I'm still here, right?"

"I hate when people say that. It guarantees nothing beyond simple coincidence."

"Shut up, Mini."

[Insert brief moment of blissful REM sleep here.]

"...don't worry, though. This isn't permanent. You're not *living* on a server, you're spending a few days there. The Internet never forgets. Your bytes are still out there. We'll find them, we'll find your parents, and by this time next month it'll just be one of those things you laugh about over drinks and pizza at Oggi's..."

[Insert second brief moment of blissful REM sleep here.]

"Yuck—what's that smell?"

"Hey, guys. Does anyone know where the plunger is? I think I broke Theo's toilet."

# Wang Shui

**@theo**

My English teacher once warned that starting a story with your protagonist waking up in the morning is the hallmark of a novice and/or lazy writer, and that any student doing so would automatically earn themselves a severe grade point deduction. I guess whoever's writing the story of my life just got bumped from a possible B to a definite C, because that's exactly the kind of cliché I'm currently enacting, roused from sleep by the incessant beeping of my alarm clock, reaching for the snooze button, fumbling for my contacts, for my phone. I roll haphazardly out of bed and onto the floor, where I remain curled in a fetal position as I squint at my phone's cracked touchscreen, trying to make out the time. I could just as easily have glanced at the alarm clock on the way down, but for reasons unimportant, my brain's still currently in safe mode, with only a bare minimum of drivers loaded.

That's why, on opening the case to my contacts, I freak out when I find it's empty—and then immediately realize (duh) the very fact that I can *see* it's empty means I'm already wearing my contacts. I'd inadvertently left them in overnight. But as I'm not showing any symptoms of eye rot, I push any related worry to the back of my mind and force myself to get ready for school.

After this morning's chaos, my room is conversely serene as I wrangle clean clothes, deodorant, textbooks, my backpack. Morning sun tousles the curtained window; Ernie's absence has freed up half a dozen cubic feet of floor space; Beta's server quietly hums away on the floor. I'm assuming that's where Mini, Beta, and Jan are at the moment, hopefully looking into how to fix the missing bytes issue.

Downstairs, Mom and Dad are almost finished with breakfast by the time I stumble into the dining room. Mom makes eye contact with me briefly, awkwardly —

—oh, that's right.

I posed naked for her last night.

Sitting and staring fixedly at the tabletop, I cast Mini's assurances aside and wonder if she's told Dad. Oh, God, what if she's phoned Chandelier already and asked that we explore my budding sexuality during my next head session?

"Good morning, Rip Van Winkle," Dad says to me, looking oblivious enough. He's watching the morning news on his smartphone while he finishes off a mug of green tea, and doesn't seem to notice my new hairstyle—sans the highlights, but still windswept—nor the earring, nor (if he had X-ray vision) my having switched

from briefs to boxers. "We were just about to send a recovery team up to your room."

"I didn't sleep well last night," I say quietly.

Dad nods. "Did you feel the earthquake?"

Feel it? I caused it! "No."

"Just before dawn. It was a real shaker. Nothing on the news about it, though. They never cover San Angelico."

Mom disappears into the kitchen, returns with my breakfast: oatmeal, yogurt—and a big yellow banana. "Eat up, sweetie. We leave in five." She sets the oatmeal and yogurt in front of me, fiddles with the banana in a vain attempt to make it look as non-phallic as possible, finally just lets it go and returns to her seat.

I stir my oatmeal, poke at my yogurt...glare at the banana.

"Wow. Listen to this." Dad turns up the volume on his phone:

"*Local authorities are looking for a police officer who went missing early this morning during an apparent traffic collision. Eyewitnesses say the officer was driving erratically after someone threw a mechanized puppet at his squad car...*"

I choke on my food, sputtering oatmeal across the table.

Mom frowns at me. "Are you okay, honey?"

I wave her away, clutching at my throat, my eyes now transfixed on Dad's phone.

"*...the puppet was reportedly seen holding a smartphone while clinging to the hood of the officer's car, leading police to believe the officer may have been the victim of a drone-controlled snapgrabbing attack using the popular SuperMegaNet social networking software...*"

"What's 'snapgrabbing?'" Mom asks.

The newscaster, as if in reply: "*Snapgrabbing, the act of uploading someone to a random phone or SuperMegaNet server without their prior consent, has been making headlines recently as the prank of choice among young SuperMegaNet users. However, this morning's altercation underscores growing concerns about the possibility for malicious use of the technology. How and why a preadolescent puppet was used has yet to be determined at this time. Take a look at this cell phone video shot by an early-bird commuter who witnessed this morning's snapgrab attack first-hand...*"

Holy crap.

Mini's made the morning news.

I glance worriedly at Mom and Dad, fully expecting them to turn to me and ask, "Why in the world is there a snapgrabbing puppet on the news who looks just like you?"

Instead, Dad just shakes his head and says, "Wow, you don't see that every day."

Mom doesn't say anything.

Indeed, she gets to her feet, steps beside Dad, gives him a kiss on the cheek, and, with a preoccupied look in her eyes, says to me, "Time to go, Theo."

I take one last mouthful of oatmeal—mostly for show—and wave goodbye to Dad, follow Mom out into the hall, grabbing my backpack and putting on my shoes as we go.

During the car ride to school, the two of us sit in silence. My junk is tucked inconspicuously away in my pants, but paranoia has me obsessing over every crease, every bulge—every indicator that there's a burgeoning young erectile organ just waiting for any old excuse to show itself off in the grandest fashion possible. *I can go from zero to sixty in under six seconds!* I slump a little further into the passenger seat and stare out the window. This is silly. I'm silly. Mini's snapgrabbing escapades should be first and foremost on my mind, but instead I'm obsessing over my dong. How ridiculous is that? And how ridiculous is it that my mom should be obsessing over it as well? I'm totally overreacting as usual. Mom's not thinking about my spunk, she's paying attention to traffic, going over her day's schedule in her head, remembering something funny she saw on Netflix the other night—

"I'm just going to say this one thing," she says, clearing her throat, "and be done with it."

Oh.

Dear.

*God—*

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with masturbation. As long as it doesn't interfere with school or work, family or friends, masturbation is a healthy, perfectly natural way of exploring your sexuality."

Please, *please*, God, make her stop saying "masturbation!"

"The human body is beautiful—"

Kill me.

"—and is nothing to be ashamed of—"

Put a gun to my head and blow my brains out.

"—and I want you to know your father and I are here for you if you have any questions at all about your body, masturbation, sex—"

That's it. I can't take anymore of this—I'm literally hemorrhaging. Boca Linda is just down the block, but I absolutely can *not* spend the last thirty seconds of this car ride listening to my mom talk about puberty. It's wholly unnatural. A mother helping her preteen daughter deal with her first period or an abruptly obvious rack = wholesome bonding experience. That same mother telling her son to get comfy with his penis = creepy incestuous porn story. I yank off my seat belt, open the passenger door, grab my backpack, and hurl myself out, yelling, "*Bye-Mom-love-you!*" My intent is to land gracefully on my feet and to take off running purposefully toward campus, but instead I flop out onto the ground with exactly zero poise and roll onto my face on the grass flanking the curb.

Mom stops the car. "Theo! Are you all right?"

I lift my head, spitting grass and dirt. "Just fine. I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Are you sure?"

I get to my feet and close the car door. I wave cheerfully.

Still, Mom looks worried. For a split-second there's a very real chance she's going to get out and coddle me for good measure, but I make darned sure to keep smiling and waving until she's placated enough to be on her way.

Once her car is out of sight, I immediately crumple back onto the grass and

stare blankly at the sky, waiting for the warning bell to ring.

Momentarily, Eva—properly ponytailed, track-suited, and sneakered, her backpack slung over one shoulder—comes to stand over me. "Are you okay?" she asks, looking concerned. "I saw you fall out of your mom's car."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Oh, that? Naw. I was just doing a new, uh...yoga move."

Eva narrows her eyes. "What's it called?"

*Wang shui,* I think to myself.

# Bacon Maple Bars

**@jan**

When a hacker promises to help you find your missing bytes, you figure that means he's going to spend the rest of the morning holed away in some darkened bedroom with an army of ThinkPads at his disposal—not sit outside 3 Hags' Doughnuts and share a box of maple bacon bars with a gluttonous puppet and a pixel monster. Yes, Beta has his laptop with him, and he seems to have a lot of terminal windows (and one Photoshop window) open, but I can't help wondering if his hacking would be more effective using both hands, and not just the doughnut-free one.

"So, this is where you do your computer work?" I ask.

"I like to get out occasionally," Beta replies, keeping his eyes fixed on his laptop screen, his hand, on autopilot, hovering over the doughnut box, pulling out a maple bar, cramming a good third of it into his munching mouth.

Mini, sitting on the tabletop and lapping the icing off his own maple bar, scowls and says, "I don't understand how you keep that LA Fitness rump of yours in business." To me: "All this guy eats is tacos, Top Ramen, and doughnuts. I feel fat just talking to him."

"I'm virtual, remember?" Beta says.

"Oh. Right."

"And I'm wearing a skin. I don't have to worry about what I eat."

"So, what do you really look like, then?" Mini pauses. "Please don't say Jeff Albertson."

"Does it matter?"

"Who's Jeff Albertson?" I ask.

"And isn't that the point of the Internet? To express yourself when you're virtual the way you can't when you're actual?"

"Comic Book Guy," Mini says, answering my question. "You know, from *The Simpsons*?"

Beta looks floored. "*That's* Comic Book Guy's real name?"

"Google it."

"I believe you. It's just that he looks so much more like a 'Stuart Bloom' rather than a 'Jeff Albertson.' If anything, Stuart should be called 'Jeff,' and Jeff should be called 'Stuart.'"

"Don't dodge the question."

"Sorry, I'm just trying to wrap my head around—what was your question?"

"What manner of male pattern baldness and chronic eczema are you hiding behind that pretty-boy skin of yours?"

Beta shrugs. "Besides the need for a disguise, my real body bailed on me. Working with what I had didn't work out, so I figure I'll work with what suits me."

"Ever worry about the whole 'people only like me for my looks' thing?"

"Nope, because people can also *not* like you for your looks."

"So, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em?"

"I get the whole 'be yourself' thing," Beta says. "But who's really content just being himself or herself?"

"People who post those annoying 'be yourself' inspirational memes on Instagram, apparently—"

"Like it or not, we live in a very superficial society. We *do* judge books by their covers. All the time. We shave, we pluck, we change our hair, our clothes, we lose weight, we gain weight—we're constantly changing ourselves to affect a certain image. Skinning's no different."

Mini waves a maple-covered mitt philosophically in the air. "I'm not saying it is. I just think there's the risk of it becoming a cop-out. You—and Jan here, soon enough—playing into the whole 'looks matter' paradigm does nothing to solve the underlying issue: that modern society erroneously assigns social values based on physical appearance."

"Society's *always* going to do that. I'm neither adding to nor taking away from the problem. Realistically, what incentive do I have to be the only person in the entire world who, if given the choice, would pick being a cripple in a wheelchair instead of a hot piece of meat?"

"I don't know. The Archduke of Self-Confidence?"

"Pass."

End conversation.

I fumble with my maple bar. I've been working on it for the last fifteen minutes, trying to get my pixelated hands to do what I want them to do, and only half succeeding. You don't realize how complex a process it is manipulating and eating food until your fingers become giant blocks (breakfast at Ernie's taqueria was a nightmare). But I guess I'm glad for the distraction. If you think about it, losing your bytes is scary. You kind of take it for granted that in today's connected world, if you break your phone, you can just buy a new one and re-download all your stuff from the cloud. But what happens when your data doesn't even make it to the cloud in the first place?

Yeah, I'm trying real hard not to think about it.

"I'm going to be late for school," I say, more as a simple grouping of words to break the silence than a complaint about the speed or quality of Beta's hacking.

"Better late than as a pixel monster," Mini says.

"Relax," Beta assures me. "This is Newport Beach, not Anaheim. Truancy works differently when it's assumed you're affluent."

I look down at my low-res scuffed jeans and tank. "I don't feel very affluent."

"You will in just a sec..." Beta types out a few more commands, hits Enter...and

beams proudly at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Check out the bod, little dude."

I look down at my hands, my arms, the rest of my torso. I'm no longer pixelated. "Did you find my bytes? Am I fixed?"

"I'm still working on finding your bytes. But that doesn't mean you have to wait it out like as some eight-bit video game reject."

I get to my feet, still checking myself out. "How'd you do that?"

"Custom skin," Beta replies. "Regular SMN users can only install skins for video chat, or when they're virtual, but I've got a hack that lets you keep your skin when you're actual. I designed yours using a technique similar to the one that's used to un-blur bank account or credit card numbers, only I applied it to you instead, with your Facebook and Instagram photos serving as visual references. If you want to tweak anything, just let me know." He reaches into his laptop bag and pulls out a smartphone, hands it to me. "This is a prepaid to get you started. Keep it handy, and you'll be able to go actual wherever there's a signal. Just watch your airtime, and switch over to Wi-Fi whenever you're near a hotspot. That'll cut down on your data usage. Oh, and for God's sake, keep the thing charged. You don't want to wink out in the middle of some random street, because then you'll have to go back and find your phone later—if someone doesn't outright steal it the moment it hits the ground."

I swipe through the phone's app screen, spotting the familiar SuperMegaNet icon. "Do I have to use the phone all the time?"

"No," Beta says. "It would only be for when you want to go actual in high-res. You can also do the same by downloading via any computer, tablet, or phone that's got SuperMegaNet installed, but this lets you keep your resolution without having to stay within a Wi-Fi hotspot. Like, without the phone, you're the Doc in *Star Trek: Voyager* before he was outfitted with his mobile emitter. Wander too far from a hotspot, and your signal will degrade until you're dumped back onto the server. With the phone, well, that's your emitter, so to speak. City-wide Wi-Fi is coming sooner rather than later. In a few more years you'll be able to walk down the street like anyone else, with or without your phone."

"Wait—a few *years*?" I look at Beta. "How long is it going to take to find my missing bytes?"

He gives me a sympathetic look. "Sooner rather than later, hopefully. In the meantime, there's no reason you can't lead an ordinary life. Well, nearly ordinary."

"As a hologram."

"Actually, SuperMegaNet doesn't use holographic technology at all, but instead captures, compresses, and transmits matter as a data stream—"

"What I mean is, I'll be a copy. I won't be *me*."

"Oh, you're still you," Beta says. "You're just augmented by SMN tech."

"I guess." I pick up my maple bar without trouble, take a bite. It tastes *so* much better now that I'm high-res again. Everything feels better, in fact. Everything sounds better, everything smells better. But it's still weird knowing I'm not entirely

myself.

Beta seems to sense my uncertainty. "Hey, what if you went off to war and came back with an arm missing? Would you still be you?"

"Well, yeah," I reply.

"What if you had two arms missing? What if you were just a torso?"

"Would he still have a wang?" Mini asks. "Or are we talking *just* a torso? Because that would make a huge difference."

Beta ignores Mini. "You're still you, Jan. Not to worry. It's just that *more* of you is now represented digitally. It can be a little freaky—we get attached to our actual bodies. We identify with them, we rely on them as extensions of our personalities, our souls, and all that. Then something happens that makes you question how much of you is physical, how much isn't, and how much you can shift from the physical to the mental before, well, you cease to be. For me it was MS. You, a botched download. The point is, it's only when you lose some or all of your body's functionality that you realize the possibility of being more than just the sum of your parts. You start to question whether you can interchange your parts without losing who you are. Glasses. Hearing aid. Wheelchair. Prostheses. SuperMegaNet."

"Geez," Mini says, shaking his head. "Who writes your dialogue?"

Beta grabs another maple bar, leans back in his chair, and stuffs his face. "I make it up as I go along."

## Where in the World is Jan Kounicova?

**@theo**

I'm planning on spending lunch alone. Not because I'm specifically trying to avoid anyone, but because after this morning I doubt there's going to be anyone *to* avoid. Obviously, after the Kiss, Eva's out. Jan's probably knee-deep in *The IT Crowd* with Beta. Ernie's probably working on getting back up to his optimal weight of two-thirty by lying in bed and playing Xbox while scarfing several large pizzas with everything. Mini...well, plush dolls don't count. But look on the bright side: in my current state, a half-hour power nap in the cafeteria will offset the solitude nicely enough.

Too bad Ernie's already seated at our table.

"Whaddup, Made in China?" he asks placidly, as if he's just an ordinary, unsuspecting fat kid whose psychotic grandmother was *not* defeated atop an eight-bit girder palace the night before.

"*Made in China?*" I repeat, removing my backpack and taking a seat.

"Take pride in your Asian heritage."

"How come you never bring up my Russian half?"

"Because there's nothing overtly Russian about you. But those Asian eyes of yours—you could totally get a job at Daiso, no sweat. What's with the boy band hair and the fruity Dragon Ball earring?"

Oh, right—I'd almost forgotten about that. "What's with the extra chin?"

"Fair enough. Where's pixel boy and Bug Eyes?"

"I saw Eva this morning," I reply. "Jan's with Beta, I think. Why?"

"Duh," Ernie says, funneling Cheetos into his mouth. "That's what you do when you're friends with people—you ask where they are, how they are, how their dongs are doing."

"Dongs?" I swallow, glancing quickly at my crotch and checking for signs of autonomous assertion.

"Or tits, if you're a girl. What's got you all coffee-mode?"

I look up again. "Mini was on the news this morning."

"Really? Which channel?"

"KTLA."

"Was he doing a plush charity run or something?"

"He's the suspect in a snapgrabbing investigation."

Ernie looks impressed. "Cool!"

I sigh. "You *would* say that."

"It's not my fault that in today's social media-centric society going viral is *the* coolest thing you can possibly do."

"Even if it means assaulting a police officer in the middle of the night?"

"You worry too much, white boy."

"Dude, a minute ago you were calling me Made in—"

"No one's going to arrest a doll."

"Who just happens to look exactly like me."

"Or maybe you look exactly like him. Ever think about that?"

"Ernie, that doesn't even..." I trail off, watching him finish off his Cheetos bag, then suck the life out of a Capri Sun pouch. He genuinely seems oblivious to everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. I feel like this is *Star Trek: Voyager*. At the end of one episode, the ship is all damaged and in need of serious repair; at the beginning of another, everything is inexplicably hunky-dory despite the fact that the nearest Federation star base is seventy-thousand light years away. My life has lost all continuity.

I lean in close and, in a conspiratorial tone, ask, "Are you, you know...okay?"

"Sure." Ernie shrugs nonchalantly as he struggles to open a pudding cup. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Friggin' *Voyager*. I want to push the issue, I want to grab Ernie by the shoulders and demand that he acknowledge the events of last night, but instead he just looks past me and frowns.

"Aw, you two?" he moans.

I glance over my shoulder. Eva's arrived, and she's brought Summer and Lily with her, which is kind of weird considering they live all the way in Wisconsin—oh, right. SuperMegaNet.

The girls sit beside me—Eva to my right, Summer and Lily to my left—forming a sort of cheerleader-geek-cheerleader sandwich.

"Hello, Ernie," Summer says, returning Ernie's scowl.

Looking outnumbered, Ernie says, "Yeah, hi, Summer Breeze." He nods at Lily. "Hi, Revlon."

(Lily touches her face, as if for the first time becoming aware of her over-reliance on makeup.)

"To what do we owe the unpleasant surprise?"

"We thought Eva could use a little company," Summer replies.

"She's already *got* company—" The lid pops off of Ernie's pudding cup; banana cream spurts into his face, infiltrating eyes, mouth, and nostrils.

Eva's jaw drops.

"I meant company in the non-satirical sense," Summer snickers.

Ernie sets down his now-empty pudding cup and, with as much dignity as one can muster while wearing impromptu facial food, asks, "Did you practice that in front of your mirror this morning?"

"Nope. Made it up on the spot."

"Charming. Get me a napkin."

"I'm not a napkin dispenser."

Lily frowns at Summer, removes her (Nintendo-shaped, I now realize) backpack, and fishes a napkin from the outer pocket. "Here, Ernie."

Ernie takes the napkin, starts dabbing at his face.

Meanwhile, I've suddenly and inexplicably become immensely interested in talking to Lily. "That's a cool backpack. Where'd you get it?"

"GimmeGimme," Lily replies.

"Oh, that store at the mall?"

"Yeah. They're all over. Have you been to one? They have *everything*."

"Theo doesn't go to malls," Ernie offers. "He says they're social capitalism run amok."

Okay, that's *totally* out of context! "What I *said* was, you can usually find cheaper online what you'd pay more for at the mall."

"No, I'm pretty sure you used the exact phrase 'social capitalism run amok.'"

"I just think there's value in being *discerning* with your money."

"Like it matters to your kind, rich white—"

I kick Ernie under the table.

"Hey!" he wails.

"So, Lily," I say, "you're, um, an eight-bit kind of girl, huh?" OMFG—*you're an eight-bit kind of girl?* Who *says* that?

"Someone kicked me!"

Lily looks completely lost.

I continue to figuratively jam my foot (and much of my leg) in my mouth: "You know, you're an NES fan. The NES was a third-generation video game console, which means it had the characteristic eight-bit CPU..."

Ernie face-palms himself on my behalf—or else he's merely trying to dab more effectively at the pudding on his cheeks. I can't tell which. "Dude. If that's how you hit on girls, you're going to be a virgin until you're thirty."

Eva smirks.

Summer shoots her a discouraging look that reads something like, "Don't feed the walrus. You'll make it lose its fear of humans." Ernie being the walrus.

"I'm not hitting on anyone," I insist.

"Oh, please!" Ernie exclaims. "All you need is the leisure suit and some hair on your chest, and you're that creepy guy who tries to score at his friends' kids' birthday parties!"

Summer looks at Eva. "Is lunchtime always like this for you?"

Eva sighs. "No. Sometimes it's awkward."

That's code for Monday through Friday.

Thankfully, Jan, now in super high-def, sits beside Ernie at the table, his mere presence distracting the girls, diluting the awkwardness.

"*Hi, Jan!*" Summer and Lily coo in unison, so charmed by his brooding Czech countenance, so smitten by his bulging biceps that their eyes have literally been replaced with throbbing anime hearts.

"Hello," Jan says, aware of the extra attention he's getting, but evidently unsure of what to do with it. He takes off his backpack, folds his arms on the tabletop,

looks at Ernie. "What happened to you?"

"Pudding attack," Ernie replies matter-of-factly, and wipes a dollop of banana cream on Jan's shoulder. "Looks like you're whole again, Janny Boy."

Jan stares at his puddinged shoulder in disbelief.

"Are you, you know...okay?" I ask him.

Ernie waves a sticky hand at me. "Why do you keep asking everyone that?"

"Beta wrote me a doctor's note," Jan answers, still staring at his shoulder.

"He can do that?" Eva asks.

"He can do anything, apparently."

"Except remember to charge my Wiimotes after he's used them," I mutter under my breath.

"What?"

"Nothing." I tap Jan's arm to get his attention again. "I'm talking about the whole pixelation thing. Did Beta find your missing bytes?"

"No," Jan says, "but he's letting me live on his server for a while. And he made me a skin." He lifts and rotates his arms. "He also gave me a special phone that lets me go actual wherever there's a wireless signal. Does anyone have a napkin?"

Lily to the rescue once again.

Ernie gawks at one of Jan's armpits in fascination. "Wow, that's a skin? Your pit hair looks so real." He reaches out to touch it—

Jan quickly lowers his arms, nudges Ernie away as he dabs at his shoulder.

"Missing bytes? Skin? Armpit hair?" Summer looks exasperated. "Can someone please tell me what's going on?"

"Oh, the closet jock here lost his bytes downloading to Robbie the Friendly Pervert's phone," Ernie explains.

"He what his what when downloading *where*?"

"It's a long story," I say.

"So, does this mean that right now you're virtually actual," Eva asks Jan, "or actually virtual?"

Everyone looks at me expectantly.

"It's...a long story," I say again.

"Hey, I have a question." Ernie wags what's left of his napkin at Summer and Lily. "It's lunchtime here. You girls live in Wisconsin, right? That's two hours ahead—how can it be lunchtime there, too?"

"Because it's *not* lunchtime," Summers says, "and we home school, remember?"

Lily smiles, nods proudly. "We set our own schedules."

I feel Eva pinch me in the side. "When were you guys going to tell me about Jan?"

"Er...after lunch?" I smile sheepishly.

She shakes her head, leans forward, pokes at Jan's arm. "Does it hurt?"

"It kind of pinches when people poke and prod me."

Eva frowns, but doesn't stop poking and prodding him. "Are your parents upset?"

"Actually, they don't know."

"How can you keep something like losing your bytes from your parents?"

"I'm not sure where they are. My apartment got towed yesterday."

"*Aww!*" the girls all coo together, their bodies going full-on minimalist *chibi* style, their eyes becoming throbbing hearts once again as they levitate from my side of the table to Jan's. They settle beside him, coaxing, coddling. In unison again: "*That's the saddest thing I've ever heard!*"

Ernie sends me a dire look, grabs onto the tabletop and braces his soft bulk in an attempt to prevent the *chibi* ambush from ousting him off the bench completely. "The future is now, Asian Adjacent. Economy in the toilet, everyone's apartment towed, the rest of us poor slobs living on a server in your bedroom."

I resist the urge to work out in my mind exactly where in my room I'd place all those extra hard drives and server racks should the SuperMegaNet apocalypse arrive, and instead pretend to be busy searching for something in my backpack—when I unexpectedly find this certificate-looking piece of paper wedged between two of my textbooks.

"What's that?" Ernie asks.

"The deed to my spunk," I murmur, reading the title.

"What?"

Blushing, I quickly stuff the certificate back into my backpack. "Don't ask."

"Don't tell," Ernie replies.

# No Substitutions

**@ernie**

Look at Jan 2.0. The powder-puff girls are all over him, oohing and awing and squeezing his biceps, palpitating his pecs, literally absorbing him like two giant girl-shaped amoebas. I've let them have that side of the table—not because they ousted me or anything, but because I prefer this side. Always have. And anyway, I don't need to be all up in Janny Boy's face. So with his fancy new skin he's ditched his ridiculous orange frizz for a natural brown buzzcut. So he's all *American Ninja Warrior*. I don't see what the fuss is about. It's not like he can turn water into soda or feed the entire cafeteria with a single loaf of Hawaiian bread.

Crap. I could go for a loaf of Hawaiian bread right about now.

"Are you bigger than before?" I ask, watching Jan's shoulders flex obnoxiously as he squirms between Summer and Lily's incessant coddling.

"A little," he replies. "I think Beta exaggerated parts of my skin whenever he wasn't sure about something."

"I hope he gave you a nice foot-long, at least."

"Sandwich or wang?" Mini asks, having crawled from out of nowhere to perch on Theo's shoulder.

"Both."

The girls blush.

I nudge Eva and scowl. "Have fun breaking in the new skin tonight." Winking at Jan: "Oh, you are *so* getting laid tonight!"

"Why, are you offering?" Jan says to me in a moment of uncharacteristic cunning, diverting attention from the smoldering Eva.

"I'm not gay!" I shout—

—just as an older student happens to walk by our table. He gives the six of us (especially me) a curious look before moving on.

"I was joking," Jan assures me.

"I know," I lie.

Theo snickers. "This is your head." He grasps the top of my head with his hand. "This was the joke." He mimics hurling a baseball over it.

Everyone laughs.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, unwinding my middle finger and presenting it in panorama. "Fat kid doesn't get anything that's not food or porn-related, or otherwise doesn't power his rolls. *Har-har*." I dig around in my backpack for dessert: a box of Junior Mints that won't talk back.

Mini nudges Eva when he thinks none of us are paying attention. “So, you’re here.”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Eva replies, quietly.

“I would’ve thought you’d be eating lunch in the gym or something after last night’s shenanigans.”

“What shenanigans?”

“You know, you and Theo making out in your bedroom.”

Theo suddenly forgets how to breathe, goes into a choking fit.

“We didn’t make out—is that was he told you?” Eva glares at Theo. “Is that what you told everyone?”

Theo waves his hands back and forth—as much a gesture of denial as an urgent visual plea for someone to perform the Heimlich maneuver on him.

“Don’t answer. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve decided not to hide from my embarrassments. Once you’re finished dying, you might want to take a hint and do the same.”

“Wow,” Mini says to Theo. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think she just called you an embarrassment.”

Theo gets to his feet, and, taking several controlled breaths to restore proper respiration, starts digging around in his pants. “I’m going to the vending machine. Does anybody want anything?”

“Potato chips,” Eva says, and starts to reach into her backpack for change.

“My treat,” Theo clarifies, holding up his wallet.

“I’ll have a Coke,” I say. “Skittles, too—and some Funyuns.”

Theo nods and holds out his hand. “Change, please.”

“But you just said your treat!”

“Jan’s going through some tough times. Summer and Lily are guests—”

“And so that leaves the fat kid to fend for himself?” I bang my fists on the table, throw my head back. “Discrimination!”

Mini sighs. “Here we go—”

“Once again an ordinary white boy is discriminated against because of the color of his skin, the notches in his belt!”

“No,” Theo says, “I’m discriminating against you because I know you. If I buy you snacks once, I’m going to be doing it every day for the rest of the school year regardless of whether or not you have change on you. You just want free snacks, or double the snacks.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing! “Okay, Jan I get. He’s poor and pixelated and totally screwed. But the powder-puff girls? Cheerleaders don’t snack! And Bug Eyes here...” I narrow my eyes at Eva. “What unholy grasp does she have over you? I’d say it’s a good pair of tits, except she hasn’t got any.”

Eva glares at me with all the intensity her bulbous chihuahua peepers can muster. “Not everyone is lucky enough to be as big-bosomed as you.”

“I don’t have breasts!”

And fiack me, that same student who’d overheard me deny my homosexuality a few minutes ago is passing by our table again—and is now no doubt thinking I’m a

flaming fat-ass wallowing in denial.

"Context!" I bark over my shoulder as I dig around in my pockets, finding a fiver with a piece of bubble gum stuck to it. I peel off the gum and hand the money to Theo, who holds it at arm's length, between thumb and index finger. "I want all my change!"

Summer and Lily mention something about vitamin water and granola bars.

Jan requests a "Mr. Goodyear or Babe Ruth. Anything with peanuts." Friggin' Czech.

Theo nods and, stuffing Mini into his pocket, leaves the table.

I turn to Jan. "What happens to the food you eat?"

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Does it upload back with you, or do you leave behind a pile of poop whenever you go virtual?"

"How about I sit on your lap, and we can find out?"

"Oh, you're *hilarious*, pixel boy."

"And you're gross," Summer replies on Jan's behalf.

"You're just jealous because I can do this..." I empty the box of Junior Mints into my mouth. "...without having to vomit afterward."

"Whatever. You're still gross."

"She speaks the truth, leviathan," Jan chuckles, and gets to his feet. Prying the girls from his torso, he sets them down, one at a time; their bodies morph from *chibi* form back to regular ol' *gurl* form.

"Where are you going?" Lily asks.

"Bathroom break," Jan answers. He leaves the table.

I give Summer and Lily an annoyed look. "Why are you two even here? Boca Linda is a closed campus—and a high school. This is no place for little kids unless you're special, like us."

"Oh, you're *special*, all right," Summer says.

Lily giggles.

"What's so funny?"

She giggles some more.

Eva sighs. "Head. Joke. And so forth."

I chew my Junior Mints with extreme prejudice.

It takes forever, but Theo eventually returns bearing an armful of snack food. On noticing Jan's absence, he asks, "Where'd Jan go?"

"To the crapper," I reply, beckoning for my snacks with both hands.

Theo dumps everything onto the tabletop—and it immediately becomes obvious that he does *not* know how to take people's orders. I specifically asked for Coke, Funyuns, and Skittles, but did he get me Coke, Funyuns, and Skittles? Effing nar! He got Pepsi, Lay's sour cream and onion, and M&Ms!

"What's this?" I hold up the bottle of Pepsi. "What are these?" I wag the Lay's and M&Ms in the air.

Theo glares at me. "Dude, they didn't have exactly what you asked for, so I substituted."

"No substitutions!" I wail.

"What do you care? You're going to eat it all anyway."

"That's beside the point! If I'd sent you to the pharmacy for toothpaste, would you have come back with Bengay?"

Theo shakes his head, flings a dollar and some coins at me. "Here's your change. Next time get your own junk food." He sits, takes out his wallet, starts organizing his change.

"What's that for?" Lily asks, noticing the folded pink slip hiding between a pair of dollar bills.

"While I was buying food for five," Theo replies, "Thrill-Kill happened to be standing in line behind me, and decided that I'm trying to fill some kind of bottomless emotional void by overeating. She wants me to come see her tomorrow afternoon. So, thanks for that, your fatness."

"Hey!" I yell. "I'm not the only one you were getting snacks for!"

"No, but you definitely put me over the top."

"You guys get pink slips for counseling stuff?" Summer asks.

Theo shrugs, pulls out his phone to answer an incoming call. "Hey. What? Where are you calling from? I thought you were just going to the bathroom. How come you're in my room? Oh. Um...sure. No problem." He ends the call, pockets his phone, and face-palms himself.

"What was that about?" Eva asks.

"Jan dropped his phone in the toilet, and he wants me to go get it for him."

My arm drops onto the table and, of its own accord, starts moving slowly toward the Baby Ruth.

# Murphy's Likelihood

**@jan**

The instant it happens, I'm reminded of one of Ernie's more philosophical tweets:

> It's an inevitability of every friendship that you'll one day see each other's wangs. #dongwisdom

For me, that day is today. One minute I'm safely in a stall in the boys' restroom, the next I'm standing back in Theo's bedroom, pants down and *čurák* out.

The classic NES Konami pause jingle sounds.

Beta and Mini, sitting cross-legged on the floor, had been playing *Super Smash Bros.* before my untimely arrival, but now they're frozen in place, gawking, jaws hanging open.

I yank up my pants, smile, wave, and say, "Hi, guys."

The Konami jingle sounds again.

Beta and Mini unpause.

Mini wastes no time in asking the obvious: "Why did you show us your wang just now?"

"I think I dropped my phone in the toilet," I reply.

"Is that a European thing?"

"Dropping phones in toilets?"

"No, peeing with your pants down."

Beta glances sideways at Mini. "What's wrong with a dude dropping his pants to take a leak?"

"Nothing. It's just…unorthodox."

"And you know this how?"

"Common knowledge," Mini says.

Beta sets down his controller. "Jan, exactly how did you drop your phone in the toilet?"

I hang my head. "I forgot I didn't have a shirt pocket."

Beta smiles, amused. "Oh, Maurice Moss. What is it with you and phones?"

"I think I'm cursed."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Mini says. "Statistically speaking, you're right on track. Murphy's Likelihood."

"Murphy's Likelihood?"

"You've heard of Murphy's Law, right?"

"Yeah." I think for a moment. "That was the eighties movie where Eddie Murphy played a cop."

Beta glowers at me, murderous. "Meanwhile, as I add *Beverly Hills Cop* to a VLC playlist titled, 'all-time classic unseen eighties movies preventing Jan from ever attaining proper manhood…'"

"Murphy's Likelihood," Mini continues, "is an offshoot of Murphy's Law. Where Murphy's Law dictates that what can go wrong, will go wrong, Murphy's Likelihood states that what goes wrong will occur sooner rather than later. Let's say you get a new pair of glasses. The odds are high that you'll damage them in some way at least once in the first year of ownership. The odds are even higher that you'll damage them in the *first* half of said year rather than in the *second* half. Especially if you can only afford to replace your glasses once a year. That's Murphy's Likelihood."

"But I don't wear glasses," I say.

"Phone, glasses, laptop, car—it doesn't matter. You're less likely to incur damage at the end of the term of ownership. It's always at the very beginning so that you wind up having to use a damaged product for the majority of ownership. It's part of the universe's ongoing cosmic stand-up comedy routine."

"That sounds made up."

Mini looks at Beta. "I'm not wrong, am I?"

"You're not *not* right, is more like it," Beta replies.

"Don't be so double negative."

"Good one." Beta and Mini bump fists.

I shake my head. "Murphy's Likelihood can't be a real thing, can it?"

Beta glares at me. "Just ask anyone who's ever dropped their new smartphone in the toilet the first day they got it."

# Dongstalker

**@theo**

Jan loses his phone in the toilet, and I'm the one perving around the boys' restroom like some kind of dongstalker.

When did my life become its own parody?

One of the urinals is being used by an older kid who's apparently checking social media on his phone while taking a *very* casual leak. Of the four stalls, three appear to be in use. Depending on whether or not Jan was taking a dump at the time of droppage, and assuming no one's doubling up (don't ask, don't tell), that equals three, possibly four people more than I'd like to have to deal with under the circumstances. My instinct is to wait until the urinal boy finishes before I start poking around, but what if, in that time, another boy comes in? What if *two* more come in? What if Typhoid Mary's zombified corpse has broken quarantine, and has been slinging Boca Linda lunches for the past few weeks—leading to a massive influx of sickened teenagers all converging on this very spot within the next thirty seconds?

I force my legs into motion, walking over to the urinals. The other boy is using the one on the far right. I take up post beside him. As casually as possible, I tilt my head to the left, spying empty, phone-free urinals. Facing forward again, I take a deep breath, psyching myself up for what's coming next. Just a quick, incidental peek into the urinal on my right to check for my friend's lost phone. It has nothing to do with high school wang, which is the *last* thing on my mind. In fact, it's not on my mind at all until that fateful instant during which I make the glimpse, and simultaneously realize the following: I'm looking at another dude's junk; said dude is now looking at me; all is for naught, because Jan's phone isn't in the urinal. Of *course* it isn't. Why would anyone just whiz on someone's phone? Unless that's the new gallon-smashing?

I face forward again and wait for the boy to leave. The instant he's out the door (and likely taking to his friends a twisted tale of being ogled by someone's curious younger brother), I zip, flush, and turn my attention to the stalls. The open one is clear—no phone. That would be too easy. As for the other three, it occurs to me all I have to do is check which one isn't currently occupied, thereby confirming the likelihood that's the one Jan had been using.

Dropping onto my hands and knees, I peer under the stall doors—at just about the exact same moment two more boys decide to enter the restroom. With cockroach-like reflexes, I scurry into the third-from-left stall, which is empty, and

freeze in place, listening, waiting, hoping to God no one saw me. Jeans are unzipped; the sound of urine trickling echoes against the tiled walls; in the stall beside mine, someone's ass puffs the word "*bouffant!*" during a bowel movement.

Unsure if I'm doing so to complete my mission or to puke, I grab the rim of the toilet bowl and haul myself up for a look inside. Lo and behold, Jan's phone is floating face-down in the water.

More boys enter the restroom.

More urine is expelled.

More turds are dispensed.

All the while, I'm gazing at Jan's phone, spirit willing, but flesh all kinds of weak. I will say this about Boca Linda: the toilets are clean. But they're still *toilets*—and with all the tinkling and dumping going on around me, I'm reminded that people's excrement has heretofore occupied the inside of the bowl before me. I feel like Willie in the bug tunnel scene from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. To save the day, all she had to do was pull a lever crawling with insects galore. This toilet is my lever. Any minute now, Jan's gnarled fist is going to explode at me from the depths of the bowl, followed by a murky exclamation: "*Do it now!*"

I'm really, seriously considering just up and walking away, making up some lie about the phone not being here. Phones get stolen all the time—why not from the bottom of toilet bowls?

I go so far as to turn around and grab the stall door handle. But then I stop, gritting my teeth, feeling a sudden surge of determination. Jan's lost his parents, his apartment, and his bytes. The least I can do is dig around in a little poop water on his behalf. Besides, I've witnessed a wang that wasn't my own, I've got pee stains on my knees and restroom musk in my hair—it's not going to be for nothing!

I face the toilet again, bend over, squeeze my eyes shut, and reach into the bowl, fishing around momentarily before grabbing Jan's phone and hauling it out. Holding it between thumb and forefinger, I fumble for the door handle and flail out of the stall, making a beeline for the nearest sink. I toss the phone in and blast the faucet.

As I'm scrubbing up to my forearms with hand soap, Jan's friend Mark walks in. He stops when he sees me. "Hey, Theo."

"Hey," I reply.

He snickers knowingly. "Dropped your phone in the toilet, huh?"

I want to lie, or at least make up something witty. "Uh-huh."

Mark heads over to the nearest urinal for a nonchalant leak while he goes on to say, "First-world problems. Phones spend as much time on the ground or in the toilet as they do in our pockets. When you get home, take the battery out and swab the thing with some high-concentration rubbing alcohol, then let it dry. You *did* take the battery out, right?"

"Of course," I start to say—

—as Jan's phone rings.

Calmly and quietly, I turn off the faucet, pick up the phone. I ignore the call with an annoyed tap of my finger. "I'm going to leave now," I tell Mark.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” he chuckles as I exit the boys’ room—
—and run right into Thrill-Kill.
“Mr. Ivanovich,” she says, folding her arms and frowning. “In my office. Now.”

## The Beaumont-Love Awkwardness

**@theo**

I follow Thrill-Kill down the hall. But instead of heading toward her office, we end up in the teacher lounge.

"Budget cuts," she explains on seeing my curious expression. "The Boca Linda administration believes it's more cost-effective for my office to be hosted on a SuperMegaNet server. Meanwhile, the football team just got new uniforms. *Priorities*."

We sit at an empty table toward the back, and Thrill-Kill takes out her phone, fires up the SuperMegaNet app and hits "Visit"—

—delivering us onto a cheesy RKO jungle treehouse movie set.

In black and white.

With me skinned as Cameron Beaumont, she as Dorothy Love—you know, Puck the Monkey and Jane Martin, from those ancient *Puck Martin* movies?

W. T. F.

Thrill-Kill clears her throat. "Well. This is awkward." There's a large dinner table in the center of the room. She walks over to it, takes a seat, pulls a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her jungle tunic. She lights up, takes a voluminous drag, exhales slowly. "I seem to have uploaded us to the wrong room."

"Oh." I glance down at my monkey-boy self. I'm wearing nothing but a skimpy loincloth. On the plus side, I do have a bad-ass dagger strapped to my left thigh. Unsheathing it tentatively, I test the tip with my finger, discover it's made of rubber.

"I had a thing for Rex Carver movies when I was a girl," Thrill-Kill continues. "Don't act so offended, sweet thing. Thirty years from now, everything you hold dear will be as obsolete and out-of-touch to tomorrow's kids as this is to you. Shall we discuss the security camera footage of your prowling around the boys' restroom?"

After several botched attempts, I re-sheath my dagger and sit across from Thrill-Kill at the table (which, by the way, looks more like something from *Donkey Kong Country* than actual, feasible craftsmanship performed by a young, jungle-dwelling scientist couple and their monkey-boy son/lab assistant). "There are security cameras in the boys' restroom?"

"And the girls'."

Let me rephrase that. "*Why* are there security cameras in the restrooms?"

"It's purely a political correctness thing, I assure you. Now, to the matter at

hand."

I slouch in my seat. "I was, uh, looking for my friend's phone."

"And something else, perhaps?"

"Nope. Just the phone—"

"I get it. You're twelve, jet-skiing toward thirteen. This is a new and exciting time in your life. The mind is sharp, the flesh is pert, the juices are flowing, there's fresh grass on the lawn." Thrill-Kill leans back in her seat, smiles amusedly. "Here you are, on the cusp of puberty, surrounded day in and day out by legions of fine young specimens exuding power and potency like it's nothing. I don't blame you for wanting a peek, a touch, a taste. If I were your age, I'd never make it out of the locker room." She utters a nostalgic sigh. "Just a glimpse, a gander, an innocent touch in the shower, a burgeoning friendship blossoming under the bleachers on a lazy afternoon—"

"Puck, what are you up to?"

I'd been gripping the tabletop with both hands, eyes scrunched shut, teeth gritted, mind flooded with prayers to God for a snake to take up post beside Thrill-Kill's foot, thereby arresting the remainder of her uncomfortably suggestive oratory, but now I look up. The well-coiffed and impeccably-tailored Rex Carver incarnation of John Martin (why was he good enough for city clothes while his wife and monkey-boy son had to make do with simple loincloths and tunics?) has just breezed into the room, and is all kinds of displeased.

"Hello, darling," Thrill-Kill greets, blowing him a kiss.

John ignores her, stepping further into the room, murder in his eyes as he lights a cigarette, takes care to present the brand name to any latent cameras for advertising purposes. "I couldn't help but notice there's a beaker missing. Puck, have you been sneaking into my laboratory while I was off exploring the rainforest in search of new and exciting cures for all the latest fashionable diseases?"

Uh—

"Now, darling," Thrill-Kill says, doing her best Dorothy Love, "you *know* you're always misplacing things."

"Am I?" John takes a drag from his cigarette, holds up a discarded banana peel with his free hand, shakes it accusingly at me. "Care to explain why I found *this* in my lab?"

Everyone who's ever watched the *Puck* movies knows that Puck was the *real* scientist of the family. He was always sneaking into John's lab and finishing his work for him, making the cures actually cure—while John, totally oblivious, took all the credit. Being just a monkey-boy lab assistant, Puck never got more than a fresh banana or a condescending, "Oh, Puck—you silly little monkey!" as reward every time he made things right behind John's back. Aka, to use a *TNG* analogy, Puck was the Traveler, John his Kosinski.

John wags the banana peel once more. "Puck!"

Something creepy-crawlie brushes the top of my foot, and I yank my leg back so hard that I topple out of my chair and onto the floor, where, rolling into a crouch, I wave my hands hastily back and forth and shout, "I didn't do anything, I swear!"

Begin sarcasm:

Because shouting, "I didn't do anything, I swear!" in a flustered manner is *such* an effective method of proving one's innocence.

End sarcasm.

John narrows his eyes and uses the inside of the banana peel to snuff out his cigarette. Then, casting both aside, he removes his belt. "Oh, Puck—you silly little monkey! What have your mother and I told you about fibbing?"

"But I'm not fibbing—"

John pounces on me. It was a frequent slapstick routine in the movies, John chasing Puck around the jungle mansion to inflict punishment (and wrecking the furniture in the process) until Jane calmly and quietly brought back evidence from the lab that Puck's tampering had, in fact, saved the day. I guess this kind of thing passed for comic relief in the 1950s; by today's standards the Martin family was highly dysfunctional, John blatantly abusive. He never could catch Puck before the next scene, though. It's no different now. I'm smaller, lighter on my feet, and, apparently, more of an acrobat. I roll out of the way and handspring unnecessarily over the table, tumble across the room, front-flip out the open window—

—and back into the teacher lounge, sliding haphazardly across the tabletop, flopping (along with Thrill-Kill's phone) onto the floor with a meaty *thud!*

As placidly as possible, I stand up and clear my throat. I step casually toward the door, aware that every single pair of eyes in the room is gawking in my direction. Fortunately, the dumbfounding is such that I'm able to make it out of the lounge without anyone saying so much as a word.

In the hallway, I take a deep breath and start toward the locker section, where Ernie's preparing for his last two periods of the day by transferring large quantities of Chips Ahoy! from his locker to his backpack. The older kids are giving me weird looks—but, then, the older kids *always* give me weird looks. So, it's not immediately evident that something's actually wrong.

"Hey, fat boy," I say when I reach Ernie.

He glares distastefully at me. "Are you supposed to be the new kid or something?"

"What?"

"And why are you wearing monkey-boy bondage cave threads?"

I glance down at myself, three things becoming suddenly obvious:

I'm still in black and white.

I'm still in a loincloth.

And I'm still skinned as Puck Martin.

# Trumption

**@eva**

Kids don't watch the presidential debates, or the *Saturday Night Live* sketches making fun of the presidential debates, even. We watch YouTubers making fun of Alec Baldwin and Kate McKinnon making fun of the presidential debates:

**Satire version of Alec Baldwin's satire version of Donald Trump (SVOABSVODT):** She's going to take the baby on the last day of the last month of the pregnancy, and she's going to rip the baby from womb, she's going to throw the baby on the floor. She's going to step on it—
**Satire version of Kate McKinnon's satire version of Hillary Clinton (SVOKMSVOHC):** Okay, that's hardly true—
**SVOABSVODT:** It's all true—
**SVOKMSVOHC:** —and that's not how it works in these late-term cases, Donald. Let me tell you about some of the mothers I've come to know and love over these last—
**SVOABSVODT:** We're going to build a wall. We're going to build a wall, Mexico's going to foot the bill, and we're going to put Hillary on the other side of it.
**SVOKMSVOHC:** Donald, listen. We all like to make-believe. I myself pretended to be my own GMail for years on end. But there's a time and a place—
**SVOABSVODT:** We're going to make America great again!

Or, more precisely, our friends (in this case Summer and Lily) make us watch YouTubers making fun of Alec Baldwin and Kate McKinnon making fun of the presidential debates—while we suffer in silence, counting the seconds until the warning bell, wishing for lunchtime to just *die* already. I know that I don't understand politics; I don't need to copy everyone else, pretending I do.

Thankfully, Ernie walks up to our table.

Ernie and what appears to be a jungle monkey-boy.

Who's in black and white.

"Who's your little friend?" I blurt out, not really caring so much as I'm determined not to let what could be a very well-timed distraction slip through my fingers.

"He says he's Theo," Ernie replies, looking doubtful.

"I *am* Theo," the monkey-boy corrects.

Ernie folds his arms. "Prove it."

The monkey-boy sighs, thinks for a moment. “Your favorite food is honey buns.” He points at me. “Your bedroom is made up like a *The Nightmare Before Christmas* set.” Addressing the girls: “You’re Summer. You’re Lily.” All of us: “Ernie likes to call me ‘rich white boy’ or ‘Made in China.’ My favorite band is Asia.”

“Holy Maloney.” Ernie’s eyes widen. “It *is* Theo!”

I have to say I’m pretty convinced. Still, I have to ask, “How can you be sure?”

“Because no one in their right mind would openly admit to being an Asia fan.”

# Touch Bar

**@theo**

"Hey, back off, gas giant! Asia is an *amazing* band, and if you'd ever taken the time to really listen to the awesomeness that is 'Free,' you'd..." I trail off, suddenly becoming aware of the abundance of Apple products that seems to have proliferated throughout the cafeteria during my brief absence. Specifically, everyone's got the new MacBook Pro.

Even Ernie.

"So...why do you look like Curious George?" Lily asks.

"Puck Martin, actually," I reply, my attention split in two.

"Puck who?"

"He was the monkey-boy character in those old *Puck Martin* movies."

Ernie looks suspicious. "*Puck Martin* movies?"

"There were, like, dozens of them. Don't you keep up with the classics?"

"If it's not Pixar, I don't care," Summer says.

"Oldies give me gas," Ernie adds.

I frown. "Everything gives you gas."

"You still haven't explained why you're some monkey-boy from a hundred years ago."

"First things first," I say, "how and why does everyone suddenly have the new MacBook Pro?"

"Because we're *cool*. Am I right, ladies?" Ernie tries to high-five Eva, but she ignores him completely.

"No, what I mean is—"

"What he *means*," Ernie interrupts, "is that he's a Mac-hating Windows fanboy who can't stand living in a world where tech can be stylish."

"I use Ubuntu Linux. You know that."

Eva gives me a questioning look. "You're a Mac-hater?"

"I don't *hate* Macs," I say. "I'm just not into overpriced novelty computers with limited usefulness."

"What's more useful than having style?" Ernie asks.

I start counting off on my fingers: "An SD card slot. Being able to write to NTFS-formatted drives. foobar2000. The ability to access an Android device's storage without a third-party driver. Maximizing windows without having to go full-screen. Being able to connect devices and drives without having to bring several different dongles wherever I go. Not needing to reduce my productivity by

glancing down at my keyboard at regular intervals in order to use the Touch Bar. For *starters*."

"You only need to look at the Touch Bar once, bro."

"Really?" I fold my arms. "Show me how you can touch-type effectively using the Touch Bar without having to look at it."

Ernie stands, unzips his pants, takes out his junk, and, awkwardly maneuvering his hips into position, presses it along the length of the Touch Bar.

The amazing thing: no one seems to give a darn.

Dumbfounded, I ask, "What are you doing?"

"Duh. Using the Touch Bar to unlock my new MacBook Pro."

"With your junk?"

Ernie blinks. "How else am I supposed to unlock it?"

"I don't know—a *password*, maybe? A thumbprint? Anything but your junk?"

"Passwords are *so* 2015."

The girls nod in agreement.

"It's true," Lily says. "2015."

Why—what—*why?* "So, that's it, then? Ernie just unlocked his MacBook Pro using his wang, and you're okay with that?"

Ernie puts on a haughty air as he tucks his junk back into his pants. "Genital metrics, bro. Wave of the future. You're making a big deal over nothing."

"I don't care—you just boned your MacBook Pro."

"Boning insinuates sexual activity. My junk's dry." He holds up his MacBook Pro for me to examine. "See for yourself."

I wave him away and look to the girls for some semblance of sanity. But they seem only mildly offended that Ernie just genitally authenticated—and then only because he did so in front of them, not because Apple is now expecting its users to replace their passwords with their wangs. "This...this doesn't make any sense. No one's going to question needing to take out your dong every time you want to unlock your MacBook Pro?"

"Genital authentication!" Ernie barks. "More secure than fingerprinting or iris scans! Wave of the future!"

"What if you're a girl? How do you unlock your MacBook Pro, then?"

Summer rolls her eyes. "There's a dongle for that, genius." She gets up, cradling her MacBook Pro. "Speaking of which, I need to check my Facebook. Where's the restroom?"

## Your Friends Are No Help

**@theo**

The warning bell rings.

Eva sends Lily home, then stands and puts on her backpack.

Ernie does the same.

"Wait," I say. "Where are you guys going?"

"To class, brainiac," Ernie replies, and sighs wistfully. "In France they have two-hour lunch breaks, and only go to school three days a week."

"You made that up," Eva says.

"Google it!"

"Okay, I will—"

"Fine. I made it up. But my point remains valid."

"Guys."

"What point?"

"That the state of school lunch in America is severely lacking—"

"*Guys!*"

Ernie and Eva look at me.

"Can we *please* focus on..." I glance down at my black-and-white self. "...the bod?"

Eva shrugs. "Cute. Now uninstall it before you get sent to the principal's office for violating dress code."

"Aren't you curious how I got this way?"

Eva starts to say something, but Ernie immediately steps beside her, covers her mouth with his hand, gives me an authoritative look. "Dude. *Warning bell*."

"*Mmf!*" Eva groans, shoving him aside and wiping her mouth. "You've got dried pudding all over your hands!"

Ernie frowns and examines his palms, first sniffing, and then licking them.

Grossed out, Eva turns and leaves without saying goodbye.

"What's crawled up her kraken?" Ernie asks, continuing to lick his hands as he watches her file out of the cafeteria along with the other students.

I fold my arms. "I think she's trying to come to terms with the notion that you'd eat yourself to death if covered with a sufficient amount of pudding."

"I wouldn't eat myself," Ernie says. "Not *all* of myself, anyway. Definitely not my dong. Bug Eyes is right, though. You should probably uninstall that skin before you get sent to the office or propositioned by traveling circus talent scouts."

"I can't uninstall the skin—my phone was in my pocket when I uploaded to

Thrill-Kill's server."

"I thought you were toilet-dunking for Janny Boy's phone."

"I was, but Thrill-Kill's perv-cam caught me crawling around the boys' room floor, and she called me into her office because she thinks I'm gay. Except her office is online now, and instead of uploading to it, she accidentally sent us to some *Puck Martin* wonderland where Rex Carver wanted to bash my head in for leaving a banana peel in his laboratory. So, I jumped out the window, thinking I'd download back into my original skin, only it didn't work. I'm actual again—I think—but my clothes, phone, and original skin are stuck on the *Puck* server, which is God knows where—"

Ernie cuts me off with a wave of his hands. "Wait—there are cameras in the boys' restroom?"

"Really, fat boy?" I glare at him. "I'm stuck in black and white, and your biggest concern is the cameras in the bathroom?"

"Thanks to your potty-mouth attitude, my biggest concern now is the tardy bell. Good day to you, monkey business." Ernie flicks me off and walks away.

Fine. Let him go. What I really need right now is a phone or laptop, and, non-canonical stand-alone MacBook Pro Touch Bar vignette aside, he has neither. I grab my backpack and glance around the cafeteria, which is quickly becoming empty—and the more students leave, the more obvious I become. I scurry into one particular stream of student bodies, using them as herd clothing, and try to pick out Eva from all the rest. But it's too late. She's long-gone—

"Tyler! There you are!"

Some tall, gangly dude in flannel, jeans, and carpenter boots runs up to me and, not letting me get a word in edgewise, guides me out of the cafeteria, across the breezeway, and toward the student parking lot.

"Mrs. Currant is spitting blood," he says along the way. "She wants everyone onstage and in character ten minutes ago. Now, I know you and Foghorn Leghorn have been butting heads since day one, but like it or not, *RKO Pictures in the Park* is happening, you're stuck playing Puck in the *Puck Martin Saves the Day* sketch, and that's that. Deal with it and help me get these props back to the auditorium."

He pops the trunk of his weatherbeaten Toyota compact.

He hands me an enormous box overflowing with props, costumes, and a bunch of other theater stuff, the purpose for which escapes me at the moment. This is totally where I should tell him that I'm not Tyler.

But I don't.

One, because my brain is currently stuck in an infinite loop trying to calculate the likelihood of accidentally installing a Puck Martin skin on the same day and in the same place as rehearsals for an impending high school production of *RKO Pictures in the Park*.

Two, because as Tyler, who just so happens to be playing the part of the exact same character I'm skinned as, my present wardrobe is actually appropriate on-campus attire. Meaning I won't get in trouble for wearing a loincloth and carrying a hunting knife and being a monkey.

Until, of course, the real Tyler turns up.

# I Was an Undead Monkey-Boy

**@theo**

It's some kind of freak waking nightmare: I'm rushed into the auditorium, hustled onstage, and navigated between various jungle props crafted from Boca Linda's finest foam and cardboard stock. I squint against the blinding stage lights, trying to make out the details of an impossible darkness beyond, trying to figure out if it's just Mrs. Currant and a few lackeys observing the dress rehearsal—or half the school.

A flamboyantly-dressed Mexican incarnation of Hollywood Montrose from the movie *Mannequin* thrusts a rumpled script at me and hisses into my ear, "We're doing the cliff rescue scene. Just like we rehearsed. Got it?"

I nod and smile and kind of go numb for a second as I skim over my lines, wondering what the hell I'm doing and how the hell I let myself get here in the first place. I'm no actor! I'm not even a real monkey-boy!

Rex Carver enters stage-left.

"It's Rex Carver!" I scream, instinctively ducking behind Hollywood.

"What?" Rex spreads his arms. "Is something wrong with my skin?"

Oh, right. This isn't the real Rex Carver (or Thrill-Kill's unreasonable facsimile thereof), it's some high school kid wearing a Rex Carver skin for rehearsal.

Mrs. Currant's annoyed voice escapes the darkness: "Are we ready, gentlemen?"

Hollywood steps aside, shoves me center-stage. "Stop messing around, Tyler. We're behind as it is. Marks, everyone!"

Rex crosses the stage and lies prone beneath a giant foam boulder, gives me a thumbs-up.

I glance at my script again and think to myself that this doesn't sound so bad. I can do this. Say a few lines, save the day, and then I can be on my merry way. What could possibly go wrong?

Hollywood whispers into my ear, "By the way, Principal Sandalwood's got the superintendent in the audience, so don't mess up." He yanks the script out of my hands, pats me on the shoulder, and books offstage. "*Action!*"

Ah, crap.

I crouch beside the boulder.

An expectant silence presses in on me.

A million worst-case scenarios play out in my head while my entire body bastes in retro sweat: what if I fart? What if my voice cracks? What if I sneeze? Vomit? Succumb to uncontrollable hiccups? To name a few.

"*They stole the amulet!*" Rex hisses at me from over his shoulder.

"What amulet?" I hiss back.

"That's your line, dumbass!"

Oh. "They stole the amulet!" I proclaim with absolutely zero charisma. The sweat is now coursing down my forehead, cascading off my shoulders and chest, pooling beneath my legs.

Rex glares at me. "Use your knife to cut me free!" He wiggles his ankle for emphasis.

"They stole the amulet!" I shout again.

"You already said that!"

I dab at my face with the back of my arm and grasp for my knife, unsheathing it haphazardly—and not realizing until it's too late that the handle has somehow caught on my loincloth.

Which parts from my waist without delay.

And goes flying across the stage in epic slow motion.

Resulting in a very naked and *very* embarrassed Puck Martin now face-palming himself in shame before a hushed audience.

Dear God,

If you're listening, please make my death a quick and painless one—

My prayer is interrupted by the sound of someone padding barefoot onto the stage. I look up and spot a second Puck coming toward me and Rex.

"Hey, everyone. Sorry I'm..." The other Puck trails off, pays me a look of shock and disbelief. "...late."

Shut up, Tyler. You're ruining the moment.

## Chinese Whispers

**@eva**

I'm heading toward the gym for wrestling practice when Ernie intercepts me on the breezeway.

"Bug Eyes! *Bug Eyes!*" he calls out, waving his hands back and forth excitedly as he waddles up alongside me.

"I have a name, you know," I say.

"Shut up and listen to me!"

"*What*." (Question intentionally phrased as a statement.)

"Theo got busted by the principal today!"

Stopping and folding my arms, I raise an inquiring eyebrow and ask, "What for?"

Ernie bends over slightly, resting his hands on his knees and inhaling great, gluttonous lungfuls of air. "He went masquerading around school in that monkey-boy skin of his, and even auditioned for a part in some theater production. But he freaked out during rehearsals and got naked and jerked it all over the stage, and, like, three girls ended up getting pregnant, and now Theo's got to take a paternity test to see which of them are carrying his child and which are just your average, everyday knocked-up Boca Linda toilet-sex tarts looking for free child support!"

"Toilet-sex tarts?"

"Yeah, you know—all those affluent valley girls who abuse their hall pass privileges to sneak into the boys' restroom."

"No, I don't."

"Well, you would if you were a toilet-sex tart, which I guess you're not. So, there's that."

"Ernie," I sigh, "that's the single most asinine thing I've heard all week."

"But it's true!"

Highly doubtful. "Really?"

"Really!" Ernie insists.

"So, you saw Theo masturbating onstage *with your own eyes?*"

"Well, Suki told Leo, who then told Sacha, who then texted Britt, Adolf, and Enrico, whose phone I was spying on during sixth period."

"In other words, you were playing Chinese whispers."

Ernie's face goes blank.

"The telephone game."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"One person whispers a message into another person's ear," I explain, "and then that person whispers it into another person's ear, and on down the line until the last person announces the message out loud to everyone. The idea is that no matter how hard you try, the message will be changed in some way from the first person to the last."

"I have a question," Ernie says, raising his hand as if in class.

"What?"

"Do you have to speak in Chinese when you play the game?"

"No, you can speak in whatever language you like."

"Then why's it called *Chinese* whispers?"

I shrug. "Because back in the old days, Europeans had a hard time understanding the Chinese." Or something like that, if I'm remembering my useless trivia facts correctly.

Ernie shakes his head. "That's totally racist."

"*I'm* racist?"

"Currently, yes."

"You're the one who goes around calling Theo 'Chinaman,' 'Asian Adjacent,' 'Made in China,' 'Hong Kong,' and whatever else that trans-fat brain of yours can concoct!"

"Hm. 'Asian Adjacent.' I like it. It acknowledges Theo's halfbreed status politely but accurately. I'll have to remember that one."

"*Ernie.*"

He throws his hands up in the air. "Theo wanked in front of Principal Sandalwood today, and all you can talk about is racist telephone games!"

"What proof do you have besides 'so-and-so told so-and-so?'"

"My word's not good enough for you anymore?"

"You word was never good," I say, "and even if it was, it wouldn't matter, because Theo didn't, uh, do what you said he did."

"Oh, I get it. You're one of those people who believes we never walked on the moon just because you yourself haven't."

"And *you* believe everything everyone tells you."

Ernie glares at me. "You've got a very distrustful nature, you know that?"

"I'm late for practice."

"Seriously. Keep it up and you'll never dupe a man into marrying you."

I resume walking toward the gym. "Go home, Ernie."

# Shemp Job

**@theo**

Not surprisingly, Mom doesn't say much during the ride home. She just sneaks various sidelong glimpses at me from the driver's seat, no doubt wondering if I'm really me or just some punk kid who's into pranking naïve, unsuspecting yoga moms.

It had taken some convincing back at school: Principal Sandalwood had called her to come pick me up, and the moment he'd explained the situation, and had pointed at me sitting huddled and wrapped in a blanket (hastily provided by Mrs. Currant shortly after my loincloth had gone projectile), a miniature mushroom cloud had detonated above Mom's head. She'd expected a slip in grades, a truancy, maybe even a bloody nose resulting from a schoolyard scuffle, but certainly *not* a reincarnated monkey-boy claiming to be her son. If she hadn't already heard about SuperMegaNet via my New Eyes debacle, she probably would've left Sandalwood's office right then and there.

"They'll figure this out," she says as we turn onto our street. "I'm sure these things happen all the time. You know how technology is."

I fight the urge to argue with her that the Boca Linda staff most definitely *won't* be figuring anything out anytime soon. Up until my untimely arrival in Sandalwood's office this afternoon, he wasn't even aware that SuperMegaNet even existed, let alone the fact that it allows trendy students to go actual in downloaded skins. I'd had to borrow his laptop to show him how the app works. He'd then crossed himself and muttered a prayer asking that God save us from the advent of too many "Internets"—followed by a doubtful promise to work with Boca Linda's IT department (or lack thereof) to investigate the matter of my misplaced skin. His combover had also come undone.

I sigh inwardly. This is actually the first time I've been sent home from school early for disrupting class. And for indecent exposure. Who'd have thunk looking for a friend's phone in the boys' restroom could initiate such a series of unfortunate events leading to...now? I mean, what happened to my life? A decade and change of good behavior, and in a fraction of a year I've managed to kill my eyesight, throw an old woman off the top of an eight-bit girder palace, tease my spunk in front of my mom, and moon a crowd of students and staff during a dress rehearsal. If that doesn't count as delinquency, I don't know what does. Yet Mom's treating me like a responsible adult. And I feel strangely disconcerted. Like, I don't *want* to get in trouble for something that's clearly all Thrill-Kill's fault (even

though I should've gone straight to the principal the moment I'd gone actual as Puck), but it feels oddly wrong *not* getting in trouble. If that makes any sense.

Mom pulls into the garage, kills the engine, sits gripping the steering wheel for a moment as her disbelief struggles to suspend itself. "Go get cleaned up," she says quietly. "Finish your homework. I'll explain to your father what's happened... somehow."

Translated: put on some friggin' clothes and stay in my room for the rest of the day.

I grab my backpack and, taking great care to keep my blanket in place, my tail from getting caught in the door, I go upstairs to my room.

Jan and Beta greet me with dropped jaws, raised eyebrows.

Beta asks, "So...why are you in black and white—and also a monkey?"

I set down my backpack, make a beeline for the closet. "Thrill-Kill uploaded me to her *Puck Martin* server."

"Okay. And that means you're not you because...?"

"She skinned me as Puck from all those old *Puck Martin* movies." I pull on shorts and a shirt. "Only when Rex Carver tried to pommel me, I jumped out a window and downloaded into the teacher lounge, and I was still skinned for some reason."

Ignoring everything after "Puck," Beta says, "Technically, you were only ever in one *Puck* movie."

"I'm pretty sure there were multiple *Puck* movies."

"Yeah, but Puck was played by Jimmy Shepherd for most of them. Cameron Beaumont was Jimmy's replacement in *Puck Martin Saves the Day* right before the franchise kind of fizzled out." He holds up his phone, hands it to me. "IMDB, little dude."

Properly clothed, I step out of the closet, take the phone, and glance down at myself. "So, I'm not even good enough to be stuck as the original Puck? I'm a replacement?"

Beta shrugs. "Cameron Beaumont was a Shemp."

"A Shemp?" Jan asks.

"You know, Shemp, from *The Three Stooges*? He was an iconic Stooge, but he wasn't Curly. That's why anyone who replaces someone else in a TV show or movie franchise is referred to as a 'Shemp.' Like when Diana Muldaur replaced Gates McFadden on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Shemp. Or when Ted McGinley replaced David Garrison on *Married with Children*. Total Shemp job there. Likewise, Cameron Beaumont was the Shemp of the *Puck Martin* franchise. He was good as Puck, but he wasn't the original. He wasn't Jimmy Shepherd. He *did* have the edge, though."

"How could Cameron possibly have the edge?" I ask, swiping through IMDB. "He only did one *Puck Martin* movie. Jimmy did eight."

"Doing only one movie is what gives Cameron the edge."

"How's that?"

"It's the Watterson Technique," Beta explains, "named after Bill Watterson,

creator of the beloved *Calvin and Hobbes*—which is only beloved because Bill clocked out in 1995 after doing it for ten years. As in, he really, truly retired. Not like all those dinosaur bands doing farewell and retirement tours only to come back a few years later with yet another tour or album. A-ha? Phil Collins? Scorpions? All full of hot air. They all came back. Everyone knows that you do a thing once, do it reasonably well, and you're a gem. You do a thing ten times, and even if you're good, people are going to hate you by the time you get to number ten. It becomes quantity over quality. That's why Cameron Beaumont had the edge, and Johnny Sheffield became just another child actor who got too big for his britches. Jimmy was the darling little monkey-boy in *Puck Martin Finds a Family!*, but by the time he did *Puck Martin and the Warrioress*, it was like, why the hell would teenage Puck spend any time dorking around the jungle with his adoptive human parents when he was clearly old enough to be hitting up the jungle on his own? The answer is, he wouldn't. But it came down to that because he played Puck again and again and again until we were sick of him. Cameron did his time in front of the camera, and then he hung up his monkey suit and went back to Wisconsin or Iowa or wherever it was America got its farm-raised starlets back then. In, out, done."

"None of that makes me feel any better," I say, handing Beta his phone.

He shrugs. "You could've done worse. Getting on with our lives, how are you still skinned after downloading from Thrill-Kill's server?"

"Shouldn't you know that?"

"Give me a break. I can't keep tabs on everything Taurus Labs is doing." He pokes my shoulder with his finger. "Besides, it was a rhetorical question. It looks like they've enabled both virtual and actual skin installation capabilities for the general public. Either that, or some hacker has been spreading SMN code behind their backs. Where's your phone?"

"It's still on Thrill-Kill's server, as far as I know. Along with Jan's phone, my clothes, my original skin—and Mini. He was in my pocket when I went to see Thrill-Kill."

Beta frowns. "This could be trouble if people are running SMN servers that install persistent skins without users' permission. Whose phone did you use to download from the server?"

"That's the thing. I didn't use a phone or computer. I jumped through a window and I was actual again."

"Hm." Beta looks thoughtful for a moment. "That sounds like some kind of server glitch—or maybe a crash, even."

"Does that mean I can't uninstall the Puck skin?" I ask.

"While your original skin is still in a temp file on the server, no, you can't. Is there any reason you haven't simply asked Thrill-Kill to upload back to her server, then download properly using her phone instead of a window?"

My mind's eye flashes back to my haphazard download in the teacher lounge, and that fateful moment in which a noticeably black-and-white, noticeably clumsy-as-heck monkey leg had sent Thrill-Kill's phone careening onto the floor with a distinct *crack!*

"Two reasons," I mutter.

"Which are?" asks Beta.

"One, she's insane. Two, I may have broken her phone on the way out."

"Why'd you do that?" Jan asks.

"It wasn't on purpose—I was kind of running from an angry John Martin at the time."

"Who?"

"Never mind." I look at Beta. "Am I screwed?"

"No," he replies. "We're just going to have to hack her server, is all. I'll get my kit." He heads over to his duffel bags once again.

Jan puts his hand on my shoulder. "Look on the bright side."

"What bright side?"

"As long as you're Puck, Fat Stuff can't call you Made in China anymore."

There's that.

# Code Warrior

**@ernie**

"How was your walk?" Gramps calls down the hall as I enter the yellowing paperback that is my grandparents' house.

"*Lousy!*" I call back, dumping my backpack, shoes, and several pocketfuls of candy bar wrappers in the parlor. I peel off my beanie, wipe the sweat from my brow, and generally try to make it look like I am *not* about to have a heart attack from overexertion—not because I'm self-conscious or anything, but because I refuse to give any points to my grandparents for making me exercise against my will. Our house is allegedly within walking distance of Boca Linda; the idea is for me to walk to and from school every day in the hopes I'll drop a few pounds, but I'm two steps ahead of the game: I snack heavily both ways.

I pass through the living room. Gramps is sitting in his favorite rocking chair, and is listening to talk radio on his portable CC Radio. A five-foot-tall cardboard cutout depicting a pixel art version of Grams rests crookedly in the chair beside him.

"What's with Grams?" I ask.

"Oh, she's napping," Gramps replies. "She was up all night doing yard work."

(The two of us pause to share a deadpan that momentarily breaks the fourth wall.)

I shrug and hit the kitchen for an after-school snack. You might think I'm cold for my lack of concern that my grams is now a cardboard cutout of her former self, but I'm just being real about it. I never wanted my parents to die in a Wal-Mart stampede. I never wanted to inconvenience my grandparents by coming to live with them. I was perfectly willing to live and let live, but Grams had to downshift to mom-mode, going from a bestower of birthday presents and ice cream sundaes to a tyrannical slave driver insisting that I do my homework, take daily showers, lose weight—and for all her nitpicking, what are the results? A cardboard cutout. If you ask me, she had it coming.

The lock's off the fridge. It's lying on the counter, along with a rusty sledgehammer. Looks like Gramps didn't care much for it either. I grab vanilla ice cream from the freezer and Oreos from the crisper, along with a bowl and spoon, and lock myself in my bedroom, ready to rock a night of gaming and torrenting... and *maybe* a little homework, if there's time.

Except that my favorite torrent site has been taken offline.

You've *got* to be jerking my chain! Another torrent site killed in the line of duty!

Worse, it's the last one in my bookmarks, which means I'm going to have to waste precious download time finding new torrent sites. Typical government overregulation! Like I'm really going to start *buying* all my movies, music, and games just because I can't pirate them online! I'll just find a bigger, better torrent site! I'll exploit a motherlode of public server indexes! I'll learn IRC! I'll...I'll—I'll go to Theo's! He's a geek; he's *got* to have some kind of super-secret, unbreakable dark Web action going on.

Taking a mouthful of French vanilla for the road, I cradle my ice cream and cookies and bring up my SMN buddy list, scroll down to Theo, and click "Visit." A second later I'm in Theo's modern Zen monastery.

"What's up, poop-farts?" I blurt, dumping my spread on Theo's desk and noticing that he's (amazingly) passed out, sprawled face-down on his bed. He's snoring loudly, a plume of ragged *z's* rising above his head, and has a spiral notebook tucked under his arm. Jan's sitting on the floor with his back propped against the bed, and is looking like an incredibly bored bodyguard as he works his way through *Super Mario 3D World* on Theo's Wii U.

"Hey," he says when he sees me.

"Hey," I say back. "What's with the monkey prince?"

"I don't think he got much sleep last night," Jan replies, "what with him defeating your *babička* and all."

I walk over to the bed, finger Theo's notebook. "What's this?"

"His book of lists. He says he makes them to pass the time whenever he's bored or can't sleep. He was making one earlier."

I pry the notebook from Theo's arms, half interested in what's inside, and half trying to get him to "accidentally" wake up so that he can help me with my torrenting problem.

"I don't think you should be touching his stuff," Jan says.

"Quiet, Czech," I say, and start poking through the notebook. It's just pages of random lists, a few charts—and a pie graph of a human brain labeled, "Ernie's Brain," with the two largest chunks marked as "food" and "porn."

The little bugger thinks he's a comedian!

I turn the page. There's a scribbled chart ranking Yes albums from best to worst, each one accompanied by a five-star rating. *Close to the Edge* and *Fragile* are at the top; *Tormato* and *Heaven & Earth* are at the very bottom. A few more pages and there's a list by Mini.

"Wow," I murmur.

"What?" asks Jan.

"Monkey-boy's got issues. There's a list in here by Mini. It's even got different handwriting."

For the first time since discovering online retro bikini babes, Jan seems interested in the outside world. "What's it say?"

"'Study Postures: a look at the various postures and positions employed by Theo's friends during homework or computer use.'" There's a list for everyone:

**• Arkenstonehenge (Theo)**
A straight-postured stance marked by the consumption of copious amounts of green tea while sitting in a lotus position and listening to David Arkenstone, John Tesh, or Yanni.

Heh—that's *totally* Theo.

**• Protein Powder (Jan)**
Designed to burn off mounting rage during extended Windows load times on antiquated hardware, and is achieved by the lifting of weights and watching of retro bikini babe videos on YouTube.

Heh—that's *totally* Janny Boy.

**• Gas Giant (Ernie)**
Minimal muscle fatigue is achieved through the practice of a hunched, bloated posture in which the body's excess fat acts as support for underlying bone and muscle structures. Junk food can be placed between the upper belly and lower pectoral folds for easy access.

"Plush bastard!" I shout.
Jan snickers. "I like that one."
"Shut it!"

**• Rainbow Cupcake (Eva)**
A strictly honorary stance used by darling little girls who think hacking is typing out a diary entry on a pink MacBook (as if!). Performed by lying prone on one's bed and waving one's bunny-slippered feet back and forth.

Heh—that's *totally* Bug Eyes.

**• Code Warrior (Beta)**
A deceptively laid-back, relaxed posture conducive to long periods of hacking...

"Huh." I flip the page, looking for the rest of the description. "Where's the rest of Beta's?"
Jan shrugs. "Theo must've fallen asleep before he could finish it."
"I don't blame him. Hacking is the most boring thing in the world."
Jan nods in agreement.

**@beta**

*Meanwhile...*

Atop a mountain of skulls reaching high into an acrid sky clouded over by swarming server daemons, I stand proud, my rippling frame glistening, bristling, the screaming wind whipping through my hair.

"Halt!" cries one of the daemons as it swoops down on me. "Who goes there?"

"It is I, Simon Wong—code warrior!" I proclaim, raising my sword. "Your protocols have all been slain! It is time to meet thy demise!"

"Very well." The daemon bares its sharpened teeth menacingly. "If a fool's death you seek..."

I smile.

To quote Gurney Halleck paraphrasing the Bible in *Dune*: behold, as a wild ass in the desert, go I forth to my work.

# Circadian Fart

**@theo**

"Wakie-wakie, little dude."

I open my eyes. Beta's standing over me. He's still got on his Asian hunk skin, but is now dressed like a barbarian, and is carrying an oversized sword and leather-bound messenger bag.

I sit up. My bedroom smells suspiciously of farts and pre-packaged junk food. There's an overturned ice cream carton on my desk. Ernie, in his underwear, is lying beached on the floor, and is doing God-knows-what with my laptop. Over by the TV, Jan, also in his undies, is playing *Super Mario Maker*.

"A couple of questions," I ask quietly.

"Shoot," Beta replies.

"Why do you look like Asian Conan?"

"This is my hacking gear."

"Okay, not really an answer, but whatever. Why is everyone in their underwear?"

"Because it's bedtime," answers Ernie. "Duh."

"Bedtime? How long was I out?"

"Eight or nine hours."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Relax," Beta says. "You're almost thirteen. It's about time you started sleeping all day and owling it through the night."

"My circadian rhythm is going to be *so* messed up!" I rub my face with my hands, feeling all the wrong shapes in all the wrong places—oh, right. Puck Martin. "And if anything, I'm now closer to ten than I am to thirteen."

Beta sets down his sword. "Better to be too young than too old."

"Is it?"

"Come on, everybody wants to be a kid again."

"I'm already a kid. Being an even *younger* kid does nothing for me."

"Oh, but it does. As a preteen, you were at the tail end of pretty much the only stage in your life when family and friends will give two farthings about you. Now you're back in the prime."

"The prime?"

"You know, old enough to feed, dress, and bathe yourself, not yet corroded by the ravages of puberty, still able to be *cute* to get your way, still able to be *darling*. As a child, you're all sweet and innocent and full of promise. But as a teenager,

you've got to start making good on those promises—and trust me, nothing you do will ever be good enough. Your grades will always be too low, your choice of clothing, hairstyle, girlfriend, car, and college will be wrong. Strangers will hate you simply for being a teenager. You'll walk into a convenience store to buy a jug of milk, and where once you'd get a friendly hello from the clerk, you'll now receive a quiet, distrustful stare—"

"Are you going anywhere with this?"

"Something about...childhood lost and...not really, no."

I swing my legs over the side of the bed. My feet dangle halfway to the floor. "What happens if I'm stuck in this skin? Will I eventually grow up?" I think for a moment. "Will I grow out of my skin, gradually splitting at the seams like some kind of grotesque Hollywood creature effect?"

"That would be *so* cool!" Ernie exclaims.

"No, it wouldn't! And what are you even doing in my room?"

"Pirating wares."

I lunge forward, yanking my laptop away from him and cradling it in my arms. The screen's smudged, and there are crumbs all over the keyboard, and oh, *geez*, he's got, like, two-dozen browser tabs open, has somehow completely rearranged my Unity desktop so that every window has an adult site search bar attached to the top. Launcher is nowhere to be found; when I hit the Windows key, the Dash pops up showing various porn icons instead of my usual apps. "What...have...you... *done?*"

"Easy there, junior," Ernie replies. "Your Windows was all broken. I fixed it."

"I use Ubuntu, not Windows! *Ubuntu!*"

Ernie blinks. "Is that what that was?"

"Yes, that's what *that* was!"

A brief flicker of remorse crosses Ernie's face—and just as quickly disappears. "Hey, back off. This never would've happened if you'd been awake when I got here. In fact, one could argue it's all your fault."

"*My* fault?"

"Who leaves their laptop unlocked while taking a nap?"

"Ernie, I didn't *leave* my laptop unlocked. I fell asleep on accident."

"My point exactly! You leave your front door wide open overnight? Then you deserve to be robbed by whatever petty thief happens to drop by."

"An entire house and a laptop *within* that house are two *very* different things —"

"John Wetton's dead."

"Don't change the—wait, you mean the bass player for Asia?"

"Ex-bass player. Cancer."

I crumble to my knees, thunderstruck. There may be boobs and wangs everywhere, but Opera is at least working enough for me to check Wikipedia, which confirms that John has indeed become one of the rocking dead. And he's just the latest on a growing list: Chris Squire, Edgar Froese, Pádraig Duggan, David Bowie, Glenn Frey, two-thirds of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer—all gone. The Bee

Gees are now the Bee Gee. I don't know what Phil Collins is. He's not quite dead yet, but he sure as heck isn't alive.

What a horrible night for a curse.

Beta pats me on the shoulder. "Maybe a little good news will cheer you up."

"Please tell me it's that Chris Squire faked his own death as a publicity stunt, and that he's been secretly working with Jon Anderson, Steve Howe, Rick Wakeman, and Alan White on a new Yes album."

"Close. I couldn't hack Thrailkill's server remotely, but I *did* manage to find out that she's running a personal server out of her home right here in town."

I lift my head. "How'd you figure that out?"

"The Boca Linda directory, Google Maps, various public records, the almighty IP address—you know, all the things fanboys use to stalk their favorite celebrities. Anyway, I hacked her home computer. We leave whenever you're ready."

Narrowing my eyes: "Where, exactly?"

"Thrailkill's pad," Beta replies. "To get back your original skin."

"That's...breaking and entering."

"Correction—hacking and entering."

## The NES Classic Conspiracy

**@theo**

I wave my hands back and forth insistently. "No, no. We're not hacking into my guidance counselor's house."

"Technically," Beta says, "she's already been hacked. We'd just be taking advantage of said hack."

"*No hacking*. There's got to be a plan B." I glance at my laptop instinctively, looking in vain for plan B. Instead, there's just porn. So much porn. I try to kill Opera, but that merely triggers a sound bite of a woman moaning. I start closing tabs manually, one after another after another. The selection of frolicking couples is rich and varied, ranging from college cowgirls to grinding grannies—but it's the last tab that really catches my attention. It's got a gaming blog loaded. "The NES Classic Conspiracy?" I ask Ernie, reading the title aloud.

He rolls onto his side, a flurry of cookie crumbs avalanching down his mountainous belly. "Yeah, you know."

"Know what?"

"That there's no such thing? That Nintendo only made it up to bolster sales of the Switch?"

"I've heard this one," Beta says, nodding.

Where is this possibly going? "What are you talking about?"

Ernie struggles into a sitting position. "The NES Classic doesn't and hasn't ever existed. It was all a viral marketing gimmick started by Nintendo to sell more Switches."

"Have you seen *Breath of the Wild*? The only gimmick Nintendo needed to sell more Switches was *Zelda*, and they totally did so."

"Because of the NES Classic urban myth," Beta says.

"Think about it, monkey-boy," Ernie continues. "Have you or anyone you know ever seen an NES Classic in real life? On a store shelf? In someone's living room?"

"Well, no—"

"Exactly! No one seems to have one, yet all these alleged gamer types are on social media posting pics of the NES Classics they supposedly managed to buy just before it sold out. They manage to hold onto their NES Classic just long enough to take a pic and post it on Twitter. Then they sell their Classic on eBay, immediately erasing all purchasing history and conveniently losing any and all receipts that might prove they'd actually bought a Classic in the first place." Ernie

pretends to wipe his butt with his finger, holds the finger up for me to sniff. "Does it smell like poo to you yet?"

"Nobody has an NES Classic," I say, "because Nintendo underestimated demand. The fanboys and fangirls all ran out and bought one at launch. Everyone else grabbed the rest to resell on eBay for five times the price."

"You're not getting it, little dude," Beta says. "The NES Classic isn't an actual product that was ever sold in stores or online. It's a marketing campaign. Nintendo paid off hundreds of its street team members to post photos of a mock-up device. No one actually *owns* an NES Classic."

"That's ridiculous. If my laptop wasn't swimming in porn, I could totally go on Amazon right now and buy an NES Classic."

"But will you?"

"Well...no."

"Why not?"

"Because two-hundred dollars for thirty games, no *Contra* or *Dracula's Curse*, only one *Mega Man* game, and a three-foot-long controller cable is kind of... stupid."

"Exactly. No one would ever pay for an overpriced, feature-limited novelty console when they can just as easily do the Virtual Console thing, or throw fceux and some ROMs onto a half-decent laptop with an Xbox controller attached to it —and so no one will ever actually try to buy an NES Classic, nor will they ever find out that it is, in fact, a magic trick. If they *do* try, guess what? Sold out. Unavailable. On back order. In the meantime, for a hundred bucks more, you can get a Switch, which, in addition to the forthcoming slew of first and third-party titles, also includes the Virtual Console. Anyone in their right mind will go with a Switch, and soon after will forget that the NES Classic ever failed to exist at all. It's sideways marketing 101."

"Perfect crime," Ernie says.

"Well, sure, if you ignore the fact that with all the billions of people on the Internet, someone at some point would eventually notice..." I rub my face with my hands. "Okay, you know what? Let's just hack Thrillkill's server and be done with it."

Ernie nods at Beta. "Reverse psychol—I mean, sideways marketing."

"Sideways marketing," Beta agrees.

## Oh.

**@theo**

"It looks like the lights are off," I say, staring at the ominous black square that is Thrill-Kill's SMN window. The worry center of my brain entertains the very real possibility that she lives inside a supermassive black hole. Which would explain a lot.

"You'll need a scout," Ernie suggests, and leans to one side, props his arms on the floor, and shifts onto all fours, raising one leg, then the other until eventually he's in a standing position. He holds out his hand. "Give me your phone."

I flinch away from him. "It's stuck on Thrill-Kill's server, thankfully. And besides, I've revoked your borrowing privileges."

"What? How come?"

"You broke my phone—and my laptop."

"Broke them *in*, you mean."

"They were already broken in, thank you very much."

Ernie rolls his eyes. "Oh, please. They were both total virgins."

"Were not."

"Were too."

"Not."

"Too."

"*Not.*"

"Dude, everyone knows the only way to take a phone or laptop's cherry is by downloading porn." Ernie nods at Beta. "Back me up."

Beta shrugs. "Or by compiling basic sound support into your Linux kernel."

"All you had on your sweet, virgin little devices," Ernie continues, facing me again, "was some progressive rock and ordinary, vanilla manga. That's like kissing a girl on the wrist. Your gear's factory fresh, junior. If it hadn't been for me, your various cherries would be shriveling into raisins."

I glance down at the flickering, moaning remains of my laptop. "You're thinking of grapes, gas giant. And you didn't just take my laptop's cherry, you... you violated it. You forced yourself on it."

Ernie blinks at me. "Then...didn't you violate your laptop by forcing Ubuntu onto it?"

"I *installed* Ubuntu, if that's what you mean."

"And it was consensual? Your laptop accepted it willingly?"

"Well, I had to turn off Secure Boot in the BIOS, and I recompiled the kernel to

get basic sound support, but—"

"Rape," Ernie interrupts, shaking his head.

"I didn't rape my laptop!" (I can't believe I just said that out loud.)

"You vicious monster."

"Go home, Ernie."

He flicks me off, turns to Jan. "Are you going to be a douche, too, or can I borrow your phone?"

Without looking up, Jan, still seated on the floor, pulls out his phone and tosses it to Ernie. "Here, leviathan."

Ernie starts tapping away.

"Who are you texting?" I ask, suspicious.

"Patience, monkey-boy."

Momentarily, Eva—in jammies, and wielding a baseball bat—downloads into my room. She's got an alarmed look on her face. "What? What's the matter? Is everything okay?"

At that moment, two things happen: one, Ernie rips one. Like, he really rips one. It sounds like a ham and cheese sandwich clapping, smells like days-old pinto beans smeared over a rotting cadaver that's been fermenting inside a giant block of Limburger cheese. Two, Dad, looking bleary-eyed and disheveled from overtime at Megalomoto's office, happens to crack the bedroom door, stick his head inside.

On witnessing the proceedings, he mutters, "Oh."

Which pretty much sums up the key bullet points of the present scene:

- Asian warrior dude with sword and shield.
- Deer-in-headlights jammies girl holding baseball bat.
- Fat Pikachu caricature giggling proudly and wafting eerie tendrils of inexplicably visible flatum toward random Euro-ghetto kid.
- Living ghost of Puck Martin face-palming himself.

A single spark escapes one of Dad's ears, and he closes the door without another word.

## Jammies Session

**@theo**

"You're in your jammies," I blurt, gawking at Eva as if we aren't always accidentally glimpsing each other's pajamas or underwear via our SuperMegaNet feeds anyway.

"Duh," Eva says. "I was getting ready for bed—"

"No time for boners!" Ernie yells, and taps the "Send" button on Jan's phone.

Eva uploads again, a dumbfounded expression on her face.

I shake my head, snapping out of some kind of pajama-induced trance. "What did you do?"

"I sent her to Thrill-Kill's," Ernie replies matter-of-factly.

"*What?*" Horrified, I grab the phone out of his hands. "Why'd you do that?"

"Scouting mission."

"*Scouting mission?*"

"We need to scope out the place, make sure the coast is clear, right?"

"Ernie—"

"Send a guy in, and he's up to no good, he's a thief, he doesn't belong. But send a girl, and it's all, 'Oh, you poor little thing! Are you lost? Let's help you find your parents.' Double standard!" Ernie clears his throat. "Meanwhile, we use the distraction to do a little in-person hacking." He grabs the phone back, addresses Eva: "You there, angel food cake?"

Thrill-Kill's window is still a gaping black hole, but we can hear Eva shuffling around—and she sounds none too pleased. "Ernie! I'm going to break your face!"

"That's nice. Is anyone home?"

"How should I know? I can't see anything! It's pitch black in here, and it smells like—oh, my *God*, what was that?"

"What was what?"

"Didn't you hear that?"

"It was probably Ernie releasing toxic gasses," Jan offers.

"Dirty Czech!" Ernie shoots back.

Eva continues to stumble in the darkness. "Guys—there's something moving around in here!"

Chains rattle.

Eva screams. Then...

...dumb silence.

As in Ernie is a total and complete dumbass for having sent her to an early

demise.

# Four Characters in Search of an Exit

**@theo**

"Dude, you killed Eva!" I exclaim.

"Don't be so excitable, monkey-boy," Ernie says. "She probably just broke a fake nail or something."

Jan looks up. "Eva's nails are fake?"

"Of course not!" I retrieve Ernie's clothes from various spots around the room and hand them to him forcefully. "Get dressed."

"Why?" he asks.

"You're coming with me to save Eva."

Genuine confusion. "Why me?"

"Because if I'm breaking and entering—"

"*Hacking* and entering," Beta corrects.

"—so are you. And you owe Eva one. And...just get dressed!"

Ernie takes his clothes. "Bug Eyes can look after herself."

I glare at him. "That's what she was doing right now—screaming hysterically while looking after herself. *Really*."

"She's a jockette. If anything, that makes her *more* qualified to download into strange darknesses and unknown insinuations—"

I don't have time for this. "I'll pay you fifty bucks if you come with me."

Ernie puts on a proud air. "Your money doesn't affect me, rich white boy."

"I'll pay you in honey buns, then."

"Nuts to you! Are you being serious or just making fun of my fatness?"

"Both."

"Whatever. Twenty boxes of honey buns, and you've got a deal."

My jaw drops. "Jesus Christ, Ernie—*twenty* boxes?"

"Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain."

"*Twenty boxes?"*

"Take it or leave it."

Beta and Jan watch me expectantly.

I fold my arms. "What are you going to do with twenty boxes of honey buns?"

"I think that's fairly obvious," Ernie replies.

"I'll get you a couple of boxes, but an entire bakery's worth—"

"Now there's an idea."

"Ernie, I'm not negotiating with your stomachs."

He drops his clothes, waves his hand at my torso. "Then live out the remainder

of your days as an undead monkey-boy from the blah ages. I can't wait to see your grandparents' reaction to that skimpy little loincloth of yours. Oh, and the kids at school are going to love that *darling* tail—"

"Fine. Twenty boxes of honey buns."

"And fifty bucks."

"Fifty bucks *or* twenty boxes of honey buns."

"Both. Final offer."

"You know what? Never mind. I'll go alone."

Ernie's smug smile falters, ala Austin Pendleton in *My Cousin Vinny* during the Mr. Tipton reading glasses revelation scene. "Okay, twenty boxes of honey buns it is, and I work for free."

Crap—my shoes are still on Thrill-Kill's server. "Too late, fat boy. The deal's off."

"Eighteen boxes."

"Go home, Ernie."

"Fifteen boxes. They can even be Mrs. Freshley's instead of Little Debbie—"

"I'll go with you," Jan offers.

"You've already dealt with enough," I say. "You don't have to clean up Ernie's messes, too."

"I've been cooped up here all day. I want to go."

"Okay, guys. Ten boxes. Final, *final* offer—"

The bedroom door opens.

Dad's back, and he looks to have recovered from his inner-ear fire. Motioning for me to follow him, he says, "Theo, we need to talk."

And I need to rescue the girl of my dreams from certain doom in the hopes that just maybe she'll fall madly in love with me. "Okay, but can it wait a few?"

Dad shakes his head. "Now." He closes the door.

"Ooh," Ernie coos, putting his hand on my shoulder. "You're in trouble, junior."

# Noirly

**@theo**

It's a weird thing being twelve. You're old enough to know that the boogeyman isn't real, but young enough that he still scares the crap out of you. My parents are my boogeyman and boogeywoman. I know they're the hands-off types, I know that whatever trouble I'm in, it's not going to result in anything more serious than an expression of concern regarding my recent activities. But I'm still scared of them. Let me put it this way: you know when you and your friends are out skateboarding, and one of you breaks their leg trying to grind a shopping cart or something, and the bone's all sticking through the skin, and you know better, but you run away with everyone else instead of keeping your friend company until their parents and/or an ambulance arrives? You're not being insensitive or a jerk or anything. You're afraid of the figurative boogeyman that the situation has become. *You're* not the one who's actually hurt, *you're* not in trouble—you're *afraid* of getting in trouble. You're afraid that if your parents find out you were with your friend when he broke his leg, they'll somehow blame you for it, or forbid you from skateboarding altogether. Logic therefore dictates that if you're not present when the authorities show up, you can't be held responsible for anything to do with the accident, right?

Eva's become another one of my boogeymen. Boogeygirl. Whatever. The point is, my first instinct should've been to jump head-first after her the moment Ernie tapped the "Visit" button. Instead, I argued with Ernie about money and honey buns, and am now on my way to have a chat with my parents—because while I'm certainly worried about Eva's well being, I'm more worried my parents will break from a decade and change of parental minimalism by grounding me. I'm more afraid of getting in trouble.

I take a deep breath and walk into the kitchen.

Mom and Dad are seated at the far end of the dinner table.

One of the few useful things to come out of my sessions with Dr. Freud (erstwhile known as Dr. Chandelier) is fake-facing—avoiding eye contact in stressful social interactions by staring at a point slightly between, above, or below a person's eyes during conversation. Over time, my brain has gradually upgraded the technique, which is why everything now switches to black and white. Suddenly I'm Cameron Beaumont, out of his monkey suit and doing that film noir flick he never did. In this case, I'm a kid version of Dick Powell's character from *Johnny O'Clock*. Because Johnny was always cool, calm, and collected, right down to his

fedora and bow-tie, and if there's anything I need to be right now, it's cool, calm, and collected.

My parents don't seem to notice the change (Dad's Lee J. Cobb, Mom Ellen Drew).

"Fancy meeting you here," Dad says.

I stroll up to the table, head tilted forward so that the brim of my hat casts a bad-ass shadow across my face. "You snap your finger and I come running, is that it?"

Mom gestures at one of the chairs. "Sit down, Johnny."

Wait—did she just call me Johnny?

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," Dad adds.

I sit. "Am I in trouble?"

"You tell me."

"How about you talk while I listen."

Dad seems amused by my boldness. "You know, your record's clean as a preacher's sheets. There's nothing on it. A little thing with the eyes when you were a tyke. Otherwise spotless."

"I'm a good boy. I make my bed."

"So says your record." Dad waits.

I wait back.

"You know," he continues, undoing his belt and setting it on the tabletop, "I read somewhere that any information obtained via the third degree is legally inadmissible in a court of law."

"It's nice to know you can read."

Dad considers his belt.

"Here's the deal, toots," Mom says, and puts a restraining hand on Dad's arm. "You keep your nose clean, mind your *p*'s and *q*'s, maintain those high test scores, and in exchange we provide a certain leniency with regard to your personal life. We've held up our end of the bargain, haven't we, Johnny?"

I shrug. "I can't complain."

"Tell me, then, what's with the bad business lately?"

"Business is good. Business is great—"

"I'm not talking about the Web racket."

"Spell it out, then."

"Johnny, we heard what happened to you at school today."

All right, then.

"Is there anything you want to say on the matter?"

"Only that I had nothing to do with it," I reply.

"They say you were prowling around the boys' bathroom."

Uh... "'Prowl' is such a specific word."

"But that *is* what you were doing—"

Dad cuts Mom off with an annoyed wave of his hand. "Enough with the side-stepping. How did you meet the Asian barbarian?"

"How does anyone meet an Asian barbarian?" I look away as nonchalantly as

possible.

"Listen real good, Johnny. It's getting hot up in that pad of yours. Too many unfamiliar faces, too much rattling around."

I clasp my hands. "I do my chores, take my showers, turn in my homework on time, don't I?"

"You're getting a little too cozy for my taste."

"I play by the book and you know it."

"Yeah? What's with the dame in the jammies?"

"She's all right. Just a little out of her element. I'm taking care of it."

"And the others?"

"Academic collaborators. I'll get them all ironed out, just like I always have."

Dad looks at Mom.

"With everything that's been going on," Mom says after a moment, "maybe you should lay off the fair-weather friends and fancy apps for a while."

"Mom—"

"*Johnny—*"

"First, these—" I take off my hat and ruffle my hair. "—aren't my wares. That shrink at school slapped them on me unprovoked. Second, do you really want to put the squeeze on me now? Because if you're worried about me getting into trouble when I didn't have a reason to rebel, can you imagine the kind of parenting you're going to have to muster if I *do* have a reason?"

Mom and Dad exchange uncomfortable glances. There's some kind of look in my eye that's given them reason for pause—or they're trying to figure out my punishment. Or maybe none of the above. Maybe this is all about pretense, so that ten years from now I can't blame them for not having tried.

Dad puts his belt back on. "Go on. Get out of here."

I continue to stare him down for a moment longer before getting to my feet, putting my hat back on. Nodding at Mom, I turn and walk away. As soon as I'm out of the kitchen and out of sight, I bolt up the staircase and back into my bedroom.

Beta and Jan raise their eyebrows.

"Huh," Ernie says. "You look good in clothes."

Johnny is not amused.

# Midnight in the Garden Shed

**@theo**

"Seriously. Hard-boiled is a good look for you."

I ignore Ernie, yank off my fedora and suit jacket, undo my bow-tie as I stride purposefully toward my laptop. I'm not usually the hacking and entering type—but, then, these aren't usual times. I've been doomed to live out my days in black-and-white; my best (and only) friends are an Asian geek-berserker, a virtual closet jock, a bug-eyed damsel in distress, and the human equivalent of cake. My subconscious has taken on plush form. My laptop is a moaning, grunting monument to fornication.

No, these are *not* usual times.

Beta hefts his messenger bag and steps beside me, puts his hand on my shoulder. Jan, too. In solidarity we glare at Ernie, watching and waiting as he fusses with an overstuffed backpack I'm assuming he brought from home.

"Ernie, what are you doing?" I ask impatiently.

"Packing!" he barks back.

"Packing what?"

"Supplies! Munitions!" He makes a face, struggles mightily to fasten the pack to his back, though he just can't seem to get it to cooperate due to an excess of arm fat, poorly-adjusted straps, and the fact that it's too crammed with the likes of which only God can fathom. After several failed attempts at putting it on, he simply picks the backpack up with both arms and waddles over to where we're standing. "Stupid thing's broken or something."

I nod, only vaguely agreeing, and, making sure Jan's got his phone with him (I'd use mine for the return trip, but, well, you know), I hit the "Visit" button on my laptop. Looking like the DVD cover of some cheesy eighties sci-fi romp, we upload *en masse*...

...into darkness.

Smelly darkness.

Ernie lurches beside me. "Dude, it's pitch-black in here—I can't see anything!"

"That's exactly what Eva said before she screamed," Jan points out.

"Dude," Beta grunts.

"Yeah?"

"Save the horror movie commentary for *after* we've come and gone."

"I'm just saying."

Jan launches the flashlight app on his phone, holds it over his head. It looks like

we're in some kind of garden shed. Everything's cluttered and cobwebbed: gardening tools, lumber, paint cans, several dead Christmas trees. A procession of large wooden buckets lines one wall. I pray to God they're not filled with what they smell like they're filled with.

"*Blech!*" Ernie chokes, having immediately wandered over to one of the buckets and peered inside. "Check out the poop buckets!"

Yep—that's what those are. Instinctively I reach to cover my mouth and nose with my shirt—only to find that I'm shirtless. And pants-free. In fact, I'm black and white and back in the default Puck Martin monkey suit, loincloth, and dagger combo. Also, there's ink on my chest. Someone's written "good at bed" in giant, sloppy letters. "When did this happen?"

Ernie smirks. "When you were being good at bed." He walks over to me, tries to flick one of my nipples. "Are you going to go full monkey-boy every time you upload or download somewhere?"

Shooing him away, I look at Beta expectantly.

"It would appear," Beta answers, thoughtful, "that in addition to being persistent, your skin is also resetting to defaults for some reason."

"Because...?"

"I'm not sure. It may be a session bug. Or just bad programming."

I unsheathe my fake dagger, testing the blunt tip with my finger. "Wonderful. Just...wonderful."

"Hey, there's a reason SuperMegaNet is still in beta."

Ernie moves over to another bucket, sniffs, scowls. "*Ugh*. This one's even worse."

"So, where's Eva?" Jan asks.

"Not sure, but the server's right there." Beta points at a crusty-looking ThinkPad propped on an overturned orange crate. It's got an external hard drive hooked up to it, as well as a power adapter that's been jury-rigged to get its juice from a car battery sitting adjacent.

"Wow," Ernie says. "That's some ElectroBOOM-caliber work right there."

Beta kneels in front of the ThinkPad, opens his messenger bag, taking out his own laptop and a USB thumb drive.

I stand beside him, fidgeting over myself, and only partially understanding what he's doing. PHP is as far as I've ever gotten with regard to programming, and even then I've never used it to hack into anything. I suppose it's a little late to ask if this can be traced back to me—or any of us. My parents have been reasonably sane about everything up to this point, but what if hacking my guidance counselor's SMN server is the straw that breaks the camel's back? What if they take away my computer, my phone? What if I get grounded? What if they finally start *parenting* me?

Where the heck is Eva?

"Hey," Beta whispers.

"Huh?" I whisper back.

"Don't sweat the skin thing."

"I'm not." Which is true enough.

"It could've been a Donald Trump skin. Or Aughra from *The Dark Crystal*."

*Ew.*

"Instead you're Puck Freaking Martin. Own and operate that shiz. You're a kick-butt monkey orphan whose parents got eaten by lions, but you survived to help the Martins cure heiniepox and return the Wazuzu tribe's sacred amulet. You're a superhero, really."

"Except I don't have any superpowers."

"Superpowers are overrated. Batman didn't have anything but his vast fortune and fancy toys, and he's a superhero."

"Really? You're going to compare a monkey-boy jungle orphan to the Dark Knight?"

Beta sighs. "Puck rescues John from certain demise at the end of *Puck Martin Saves the Day!*, right?"

"I guess."

"There you go."

Something occurs to me. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because no one ever felt better about themselves by thinking negatively."

"Are you saying there's a chance I might not get my original skin back?"

"Anything's possible," Beta says, not entirely able to keep the worry out of his voice. "I just think you need to be...optimistic. Own what you've got, bloom where you're planted, and all that."

OMG. He's *totally* trying to tell me, in his own obscure way, that I'm not getting my original skin back! "You realize that's like me persuading you to go unskinned when you're actual, but that it's okay, because your wheelchair would make you kind of like Professor Xavier."

"You're a hurtful little scamp sometimes, you know that?" Beta shakes his head. "But because I'm a nice guy, I'm still going to mention that as Puck Martin you no longer need your custom contacts."

I blink, a ginormous mental tidal wave washing over me with such force that it ruffles my fur. I hadn't thought about it at all, but apparently Puck had 20/20 vision—or, at least, whoever designed his skin made sure it was sporting 20/20. That actually kind of makes up for becoming a monkey every time I download somewhere. Not that I plan on staying like this any longer than I have to.

"Hey, guys!" Jan whispers loudly from the back of the shed. "Come look at this!"

I carefully pick my way to where Jan's moved aside a giant plywood panel—revealing an arched doorway opening into a stone spiral stairwell that leads downward.

"What do you think is down there?" I ask.

Jan shrugs. "Where do most stone spiral stairwells lead?"

Before I can entertain my darkest fears, Ernie huffs beside me, tries unsuccessfully to keep one of the outer pockets of his backpack from rupturing—which it does, suddenly and without warning. Projectile supplies go flying all over.

"Cheap JanSport!" he exclaims, and sets down the pack, drops to his knees. "Shine the light down here, Czech!"

"Oh, Ernie." Squatting, I feel around the floor, helping to pick up his... grenades and duct tape? "You brought *grenades* and duct tape?"

"Yeah—candy grenades." Ernie holds one of the grenades up to the light, revealing that it's filled with M&M's.

"Oh." Thank God. "And Fruit Roll-Ups?"

"No, that's duct tape—just in case we need to bind and gag Thrill-Kill before throwing her off a cliff or something."

I hand him his quote-unquote supplies. "Okay, someone who packs candy and duct tape as the only items in their survival pack should *not* be making decisions on whether or not it's appropriate to throw a human being off a cliff."

Ernie glares at me. "Shouldn't you be eating a banana and scratching yourself or whatever it is you monkey-boy types do when you're not dimpling in front of a camera for chump change?"

"Listen, gas giant, if you make one more crack about my skin—"

The distant sound of chains rattling.

A girl screaming.

Both echoing up the stairwell.

"Huh," I murmur, swallowing hard.

"Huh what?" Ernie asks, having deftly shifted his bulk behind me for protection.

"It just hit me. This isn't a garden shed."

Jan raises an eyebrow. "It's not?"

I shake my head. "It's the entry to a dungeon."

# Descending

**@jan**

Ernie's eyes go wide. "That's stupid. How would you know what's down there?"

"We'll find out in a sec, won't we?" Theo replies.

Ernie's eyes go wider. "You're going down there?"

"If that's where Eva is, then yeah, *we're* going down there."

"So we can get bound and gagged, too? No thanks!"

"Dumbass, how could she scream if she were gagged?"

"That could've been a moan!"

"It was clearly a scream."

"Moan!"

"Scream."

"You know what I mean!" Ernie faces Beta and throws his hands in the air. "You're the adult here! Shouldn't *you* be the one descending into hell on our behalf?"

"Hey, I'm just the hacker," Beta responds, and continues messing with Thrill-Kill's laptop.

"Says the ripped barbarian dude who only moments ago downloaded into Theo's bedroom holding Sand Dragon!"

"I can hack, or I can slash, but not both simultaneously." Beta nods at Theo. "It's your call, little dude."

I watch Theo. He looks bolder and braver in black and white than I imagine he would in color, but the expression on his face is one-hundred-percent, *Somebody please stop me!*

Sighing after a moment, he nods and says, "You deal with the server. I'll go find Eva."

"Good for you," Ernie says, patting Theo on the shoulder and backing away from the stairwell entrance. "I'm sure Bug Eyes will appreciate the effort."

Theo's new expression: *Yeah. Effort. That's what's urging my bowels to evacuate themselves.*

"I'll go with you," I offer, and step forward, taking Ernie's place. The whole situation kind of concerns me, but, then, I'm part digital now. There's less of me to have to worry about. That means less fear, I suppose.

Holding out my phone for light, we descend the stairwell.

A quarter of the way down, Ernie comes huffing up behind us. "Hey, wait up,

jerks!"

Theo stops, scowls over his shoulder. "What changed your mind, fat boy?"

"Me and Beta couldn't agree what song to play while we waited."

We continue downward. The icky smell lingers. At first I'd assumed it was the poop buckets in the shed, but the deeper we go, the worse the smell gets. Voices echo, chains rattle; the walls have turned from brick to ancient, half-crumbled blocks packed between giant, molding pillars. It's all very Frazetta. One last twist, and we arrive at an arched doorway that opens into a large cave—like, an actual *cave*, with stalactites and everything. Between the stalactites are a number of large wooden gear things.

And there's Eva—tied to an old wardrobe and looking real uncomfortable as five filthy, loinclothed men of varying age and complexion (who can only be the Five Husbands of Boca Linda Lore) stand conversing nearby.

"*Můj bože*," I murmur, crouching off to one side along with Theo and Ernie. "These must be Thrill-Kill's five husbands!"

"No way," Theo says. "Our high school guidance counselor does *not* have a dungeon beneath her garden shed."

Except, of course, we're looking right at it—a dank, subterranean chamber filled with pure WTF.

"All right, brainiacs," Ernie says. "What now?"

"They haven't seen us yet," I point out. "Maybe we could catch them by surprise—"

Ernie farts.

Loud and long.

It echoes off the dungeon walls.

Five very concerned-looking ex-husbands turn their heads and look up at us.

I *hate* Ernie's bowels.

# The Five Husbands of Boca Linda Lore

**@eva**

I think it's fair to say my knights in shining armor, as it were, have left a lot to be desired. For that brief instant they first appear in the stairwell entrance, I'm thanking God they've come to my rescue—then Ernie screams and pushes Theo forward as he tries to run away, instead bumping into Jan, who, caught off guard, loses his footing. Theo grabs onto both Ernie and Jan for support; the momentum of Ernie's fat causes a snowball effect, which results in a tangled cluster of boys tumbling out of the stairwell and into the dungeon proper. If that's what you call it.

Yeah.

A *lot* to be desired.

The cave dudes, who'd been talking to each other in hushed tones, now stop and gawk in the direction of the stairwell entrance.

"Who are you?" one of them asks.

Theo, the obligatory little Cub Scout he is, lifts his monkey head and immediately answers, "I'm Theo. This is—"

"No real names!" Ernie exclaims from the bottom of the boy-pile.

The cave dude narrows his eyes. "Why are you in black and white?"

"I believe *monochrome* is the correct nomenclature," another cave dude says.

The first caver shakes his head. "Don't start."

Theo untangles himself from Ernie and Jan. "Who are you guys?"

"We are...the damned," says another of the cavers. "The forgotten. The discarded—"

The first caver rolls his eyes. "He's being overly-dramatic. We're cryptokeepers."

"Crypto *miners*. Now who's being dramatic?"

Standing, the boys exchange confused glances.

Ernie clears his throat. "Did y'all used to knock boots with Thrill-Kill?"

"Is that what Rebbecca's calling herself these days?" asks the second caver.

"That's what *I* call her," Ernie replies proudly.

"Charming. To answer your question, yeah, we all did our time with Rebbecca."

Jan nods knowingly. "You're her five husbands."

"*Ex*-husbands."

Theo glances around the dungeon. "What did you do to end up down here?"

The cavers—or husbands, I should say—take turns answering:

"Botched dinner plans."

"Cheated on her."

"Didn't make enough money."

"Too clingy."

"Refractory period was too long."

I rattle my chains. "Um, could we reminisce some other time? Damsel in distress here!"

Ernie waves his hand dismissively. "In a sec, Bug Eyes." Facing the husbands again: "So, she just keeps you locked up as her prisoners?"

"Women hold grudges, bro," says the youngest husband.

The first smiles stoically. "It's not an altogether unbearable existence. It may not be ideal, but maintaining Rebbecca's SuperMegaNet server and helping to power her Bloodcoin mining rig, there's at least satisfaction in knowing we're part of something greater."

"Bloodcoin?" the boys ask in unison.

"Really?" I call out, rattling my chains again. "These creeps live in a *dungeon* and are totally cool strapping little girls to old furniture, and it's the *Bloodcoin* part that interests you most?"

Like I'm not even here, the second husband explains, "It's a cryptocurrency based on a human suffrage algorithm."

Another husband spreads his filthy arms. "We're the algorithm."

"*Kámo*," Jan says, "that's got to be the weirdest altcoin I've ever heard of."

"It's not *that* weird. I mean, when you buy Bitcoin, all you're getting is a tally of electricity used. Bloodcoin being based on human suffrage is no more outrageous than Blowcoin being based on cocaine snorts, or Schmidtcoin being based on how many webcomic followers Hubert Schmidt has on Smack Jeeves."

Ernie blinks, a small puff of smoke rising above his head. "There's a cryptocurrency based on cocaine?"

"If it exists, there's a cryptocurrency based on it."

While Ernie and Jan ponder the implications of this, Theo pays me a worried glance.

I glare at him, nod beckoningly, try with all my might to scream telepathically, *Save me already!*

He steps forward awkwardly. "Well, it was nice meeting you and all, but it's late, and we should be going. Um…can we have our friend back?"

My hero.

The first husband sighs, shakes his head apologetically. "If it were up to me, sure. If it were up to me."

By now, three of the husbands have sneaked up behind the boys, and at the first husband's command, they pounce. Ernie goes down like a bag of wet garbage. Jan wrestles valiantly with his would-be captor, neither of them managing to get a firm grasp on one other. Theo, however, manages to sprint out of the way, giving chase with monkey-like agility.

"Wait a minute!" Ernie exclaims. "I thought we were cool! All in this together—

part of something greater!"

"Oh, *we're* cool with you," the second husband replies, "but the demogorgonzola..."

"The demo *what?*" I exclaim.

"Our suffrage is a byproduct of our maintenance efforts. Real suffrage comes from sacrifice—in this case, the four of you to the demogorgonzola. *So* much Bloodcoin."

"I'm a *sacrifice*?" Chains rattling, limbs thrashing, and so forth. "Have you all gone *nuts?* Who in this day and age performs human sacrifice?"

Something rustles ominously from inside an adjoining tunnel—

"Behold!" the first husband proclaims. "The demogorgonzola!"

—and oh, my God, there's an enormous, vaguely-reptilian-shaped chunk of smelly gorgonzola cheese thwumping its way into our chamber, bringing its putrid stench along with it.

W.

T.

F.

## Once Upon a Demogorgonzola

**@theo**

Wow. My Puck Martin skin's got some crazy acrobatics installed. I mean, Mom brings me to her gym several times a week, but that's all straightforward cardio and weights. As far as I know, I can't perform a cartwheel, handspring, or wall-jump to save my life—but that's exactly what I'm doing as I maneuver away from the crazed ex-husband chasing me. I dodge between stalagmites, hop over gears, scramble effortlessly onto the lip of that darkened tunnel at the back of the dungeon. Turning around, I brandish my dagger, legs planted firmly, loincloth whipping in an unexplained wind. With a conviction of mind and body that would've made the real Puck himself proud, I shout, "*Be gone!*"

Surprisingly, the dude chasing me has stopped below, his mouth open, his eyes wide. He starts backing off.

Huh. This *Puck* stuff really works.

In fact, it's not just my dude who's suddenly looking thunderstruck. Everyone's stopped in their tracks, faces frozen into various configurations of awe and terror—

Something ominous shifts from inside the tunnel.

—oh, wait. It's not me they're looking at.

It's what's *behind* me.

I glance over my shoulder. Emerging from the shadows is a twenty-foot-tall, two-headed reptilian monster with tentacles for arms and a body made of...smelly gorgonzola cheese?

"Theo, look out!" Eva cries.

I want to freeze. I want to cast aside my stupid toy knife and curl up on the ground with my hands over my ears, my eyes scrunched shut. These are the evolutionary survival instincts passed down from my parents and encoded in my DNA—but a split second before enacting them, Rush's "Face Up" starts playing in my head, and a calm detachment floods over me. I'm not sure how or why. Maybe it's a feature of my skin, or maybe it's my CBT training kicking in during a moment of need. All I know is that suddenly I'm animated once again, darting out of the way of the demogorgonzola's tentacles as it tries to swipe at me. I leap from the tunnel lip and run over to where Eva's tied up, am somehow able to cut through her bonds with my dagger. Freed, she falls awkwardly into my arms, gives me the biggest hug I've ever gotten from a girl who's not Mom—and before I can overthink it, I pull back just enough to plant a big, fat one right on her mouth. Then, letting her go, I hoist my dagger above my head in triumph as Alex Lifeson's

frenetic guitar solo kicks in. I feel just like Link from *The Legend of Zelda* whenever he's just found a piece of the Triforce.

I've paused the friggin' dungeon.

During this momentary reprieve, Ernie looks up from where he's been blubbering on the floor and locks his eyes with my crotch. "Dude."

"Huh?" I ask.

"Your loincloth just flew off."

I glance down at myself.

I really, really need a better special move.

(Un-pause.)

The demogorgonzola resumes its path toward us, busting through both rock and wood as if either were no more substantial than cardboard. The husbands are now fleeing for their lives. Well, all but the youngest, who makes a half-hearted attempt at grabbing Eva. She's ready for him, though, and uses his momentum to perform this ridiculously effective over-the-shoulder throw, depositing him right into the tentacles of the demogorgonzola. His screams are bloodcurdling and brief, quickly replaced by the sound of bones crunching, sinew snapping.

Eva's eyes threaten to pop out of their sockets. "Oh, my *Gawd*, I didn't mean for that to—"

"Come on!" I shout, and grab her by the hand, hustle her over to where Jan's helping Ernie up.

"How did you do that?" he asks Eva, looking impressed.

"I *am* on the wrestling team," she replies.

Vertical again, Ernie immediately starts huffing toward the stairwell entrance.

The remaining husbands have beaten him to it, however, and are now working together to lower some kind of wrought iron gate.

"Don't you dare!" Ernie screams at them.

The rest of us also run for the stairwell—but it's too late. By the time we reach the entrance, the gate has been completely lowered, the husbands watching intently from the other side.

Ernie claws uselessly at the metal bars. "Bastards! Crypto-creeps! Let me out! I'm fat and unhealthy! I'll give your cheese-pet indigestion! Take the others! They're all lean meat, especially the Czech!"

Eva punches him in the shoulder. "Seriously, Ernie?"

I turn and face the interior of the dungeon, my back pressing against the cold metal of the gate. Beyond a vague self-consciousness, I can honestly say I don't give a hoot that I lost my loincloth, because the demogorgonzola is just about finished eating the youngest husband, and it's got its eyes set on dessert.

Aka, *us*.

"I don't want to die!" Ernie crumples to his knees and starts bawling.

Eva looks me in the eye, takes my hand, squeezes. "We're not going to die...are we?"

I want to tell her something reassuring, something meaningful— "I love you."

She lets go of my hand. "What?"

Just then Jan's phone rings. He takes it out, checks the caller ID. "It's Beta."

"*Help me, Beta!*" Ernie wails. "*And the others too, if there's time!*"

Jan puts the phone to his ear. "Yeah? Uh-huh." To me: "He says he's got access to Thrill-Kill's server, but he's not sure if shutting it down will end the program, or you *and* the program."

I swallow. "End me?"

"He says he wants you to re-enter the server, then exit gracefully."

"What, like with a freaking pirouette?" Ernie asks, wobbling to his feet. He tries to grab the phone. "Get us out of here, Beastmaster!"

"Basically, not by accident," Jan clarifies.

The demogorgonzola is closing in.

"Okay, fine, let's do it!" I blurt. "Upload us now!"

"He says to upload us now," Jan explains to Beta.

"Yes—now! Right now!"

"Beta wants to know if you're absolutely sure—"

"Yes! I'm sure! Now, *now!*"

I grab onto the others.

They grab onto me.

Jan holds up his phone.

Waits.

Lowers his head and bites his lip as the demogorgonzola, now within tentacle's reach, lunges at us—

—we upload.

The dungeon winks out of existence.

Is replaced by the black-and-white jungle set of RKO lore.

I let go of the others, several things becoming immediately apparent: I'm still Puck Martin (my loincloth has reset itself, thankfully), Eva's still in her pajamas—but Jan and Beta are the jewel thieves Ruskov and Noh, respectively. Ernie...he's MIA.

"What happened to his fatness?" Jan asks after a beat.

That's when the enormous elephant standing behind us stamps its foot and swears under its breath.

# Temboric Interlude

**@ernie**

I'm a frickin' elephant.

# Someone Dies in This Episode

**@theo**

Okay. There's a giant elephant standing beside me. Would I be totally out of line if I ditched my friends this very instant and Pucked my way up the nearest tree?

The elephant snorts mightily.

Stamps its foot.

Farts.

I pause, primed to make my escape, arms pumped, one leg held firmly flexed in the air. "Ernie?" I squeak.

The elephant nods its head.

Quickly, I lower my leg, pretend to be working out a cramp.

"Uh...why is Ernie an elephant?" Jan asks, jaw dropped.

Beta says something in Japanese.

"Uh, because he's...big?" I reply.

Another snort from Ernie.

"No, what I mean is, the SMN server probably matched us up with available skins—Ernie as Tembo due to his bulk, Jan as Ruskov due to his being European, Beta as Noh because he's Asian."

Eva checks herself out. "What *Puck* character was a girl in her pajamas?"

"There was no major girl character in *Puck Martin Saves the Day!*," comes a familiar, diminutive voice. "So, you kept your default skin."

I crane my neck. Fortunately, this time, the server has delivered us on the ground below the Martins' suspiciously-upscale-for-something-they-supposedly-built-themselves treehouse—and not stuffed haphazardly inside. Mini is hastily making his way down the ladder.

"Why not Jane, then?" Eva asks.

"Thrill-Kill's already Jane."

I shrug. "Plus she's a woman, you're a girl."

Eva glowers at me.

"What?"

"Dude." Hopping onto my shoulder, Mini whispers into my ear, "First, nice to see you again. Second, never call a tween girl a girl to her face."

"But she *is* a girl," I whisper back.

"That's the problem."

"How come?"

"Political correctness. The obvious is obvious, but can only be stated out loud if you're able to satisfy an ever-growing list of prerequisites. *Id est*, you'd have to be an empowered, non-white, lesbian, single mother, atheist female bodybuilder who lives in the projects in order to call a girl a girl to her face and not offend or under-represent some key demographic. Even then, it's sketchy."

"Where did you come up with that?"

"Hours and hours of network TV."

Eva frowns, folds her arms. "What are you two whispering about?"

I brush Mini away. "I have no clue." Turning to Beta: "So, all we have to do now is download back home, and I'm good?"

Beta nods, sets down his messenger bag, takes out his laptop. He starts to type something in a command terminal—

"Wait," I say.

—stops, his fingers poised above the keyboard.

"We can't leave her behind."

Eva looks incredulous. "Who, Thrailkill?"

"Yeah. I broke her phone. Without it, she's kind of stranded here."

"Is that such a bad thing? I mean, she keeps living cheese and crypto-creeps in a *dungeon* beneath her garden shed, Theo. Someone like that doesn't necessarily need any favors from us or anyone else."

True that. But I'm not so bold or brave that I'm comfortable stranding another human being on an SMN server—even if that someone is Thrill-Kill.

"Give me a sec," I sigh, and climb the treehouse ladder, alighting on the deck above, padding over to the nearest window, peering inside—

—oh, *yuck*.

There's Rex Carver, and there's Dorothy Love, in bed together and banging out the black and white skin flick that may or may not be hidden away in some dusty RKO vault somewhere.

I recede from the window, sliding down onto the deck with my back against the wall, my knees tucked against my chest. I cover my ears, try to think about test scores.

A few minutes go by. Eventually, the sounds of nookie subside, and I get to my feet, approach the window again. Thrill-Kill's still in bed with John, though now they're church-naked—the blanket tucked up to their armpits—and sharing a post-coital Marlboro.

I clear my throat. "Um...hello?"

Thrill-Kill sends me a heavy-lidded stare. "Puck, dear, what have I told you about peeping?"

Oh, dear God, what's *that* supposed to mean? "Mrs. Thrailkill, it's me, Theo."

"Why, young Mr. Ivanovich. How good of you to check in on me." She smiles, takes a drag from her cigarette.

John, meanwhile, has gotten out of bed and, cinching the waist of his monogrammed bathrobe, is now striding toward me with a disapproving expression on his face. "Now, Puck, you know it's not polite to watch."

"I, er, wasn't watching anything. I just came to—"

"Jane! My belt!"

Geez—John was always kind of a jerk to Puck in the movies, but on Thrill-Kill's server he's an outright bully. He darts through the treehouse door, whips around and grabs me by the neck, lifting me off the floorboards. Grasping his arms for leverage, I swing my legs up and kick him firmly in the crotch. Virtual bots may not have actual genitalia, but luckily this one's been programmed to react accordingly. John winces, doubles over, loses his footing—and suddenly I'm falling backward, the two of us going over the edge of the deck, the jungle canopy whirling above me. I scrunch my eyes shut, my life (a series of identical classroom scenes) flashing before my eyes. Mini's voice sounds in my head: "Huh, so this is how we die. Who'd have thunk?" Then—

—*thwump!*

I hit something hard yet soft...and smelly. I should be dead, the life battered out of me. Instead, I've toppled onto Ernie's back.

John isn't as lucky. He slams face-down into the ground beside us with a loud *thud!* that raises a small mushroom cloud of dust and detritus.

One of his legs is bent into an uppercase *Z*.

Jan shakes his head. "What's with all the death today?"

I slide off of Ernie, pay John's meat a nervous glance as back up the treehouse ladder I go—for the last friggin' time, I hope.

Thrill-Kill, dressed again, is waiting on the deck. "Sorry about that. He's at times a tad territorial."

With teeth gritted and fists clenched, I glower at Thrill-Kill and say, "My friends and I are downloading off the server. Are you coming or not?"

"My, the impetuousness of youth."

"Not to be a jerk or anything, but I just narrowly escaped a demogorgonzola and certain death at the hands of your girlhood crush. I'm a little numb right now."

Thrill-Kill gestures toward the ladder. "Very well, Mr. Ivanovich. Lead the way."

She follows me down; we join the others on the jungle floor, where a large beetle is now poking around John's upturned rump.

"Everyone good?" I ask.

Eva, Jan, and Mini nod. Ernie, too.

Beta holds up his laptop, hits the "Send Home" button.

I cross my fingers behind my back.

No offense, Puck Martin, but I do *not* want to be you for the rest of my life.

## Gotenesque

**@ernie**

...and we're back in Theo's New Age lounge. Goodbye, Cameron Beaumont; hello, Goten-as-a-geek—aka, Theo's original skin. Beta, Janny Boy, and Thrill-Kill are back in their everyday, ordinary skins as well. Bug Eyes is her usual gruesome self.

Most importantly, I'm no longer Tembo. I mean, what the hell? Skinning the fat kid as an elephant? The European kid as a Russian jewel thief? Meanwhile, Theo gets to prance around as the privileged lab monkey? That's some seriously prejudiced SMN crizap there.

"How does it feel to be back in your default skin?" Jan asks him.

Theo takes an uncertain step forward. "It's like handling classic Mario in *Super Mario Maker* versus actual classic Mario on the NES. Familiar, but different."

"What are you talking about?" I ask. "Puck was the exact same size as you, just not in color."

"He was smaller."

"Maybe in the wardrobe department."

"Dude, he was *ten*. I'm twelve."

"Whatever." I shake my head.

Theo does the Asian-eyes thing at me. "Go home, Ernie."

"Thank me first," I tell him.

"What for?"

"Saving your life."

"You just happened to be standing around in the right place at the right time for me to fall onto your back—"

"Thereby saving your life."

"Passively."

"Does it matter? The fact that you're standing here alive and are able to argue about it proves my point."

Eva rolls her eyes, nudges Theo in the side. "Oh, just thank him before he throws a fit."

"Fine. Thank you."

Huh. Not as satisfying as I'd hoped. "Say it like you mean it."

"I meant it."

"Say it as a complete sentence."

"'Thank you' *is* a complete sentence."

"Say it as a *more* complete sentence."

Theo frowns, looks at Beta.

Beta shrugs. "A well-composed sentence is a friend to everyone, little dude."

Looking at me again, Theo sighs and says, "Thank you for saving my life, *Tembo*." He takes Jan's phone, taps the "Send Home" button.

But not before I flick him off.

# I'm Your Bestie

**@eva**

We all stand around for a moment, basking in the awkward.

Beta says, "If anyone needs me, I'll be on my server." He waves goodbye and uploads.

More awkward ensues.

Mini motions for Jan to follow him over to the TV, and just like that, they're playing a game of *Splatoon*—as if nothing untoward whatsoever has transpired in the last twenty-four hours.

"Why am I not surprised by the décor, Mr. Ivanovich?" Thrill-Kill asks, appreciating the various features of Theo's room (or possibly looking for a cigarette).

"I...don't...know?" Theo shifts away from her, comes up to me, totally tries to pretend he's not checking me out. He holds up Jan's phone. "Well, I guess you should be getting home."

"Yeah," I reply, suddenly self-conscious. Like, is he checking me out simply because I'm in my jammies, or is there some pimple or blemish that I should be made aware of? "Uh, thanks for saving me and all."

"It was no big deal."

"It kind of was."

"Yeah."

I hem.

He haws.

"Just so you know," I say, "down in the dungeon, the holding hands, the kissing, that was just—"

"Of course. And the loving you thing, that was just—"

"You thought we were going to die."

"Exactly."

"Yep. Same here. Not that the only way I'd ever hold hands with you is if I thought we were going to die, but...you know what I mean?"

"Totally. I'm your bestie." Theo sings that last part, smiles nervously, still holding up Jan's phone, still not sending me home.

"'I'm your bestie?'"

"Yeah, like in that Members of the Board song where Peter Template sings, 'I'm your bestie.'"

"Why doesn't it surprise me that you listen to a band called Members of the

Board, with a singer whose name is Peter Template?"

"It's not his real name. Each member has a stage name that goes along with the starched shirt-and-tie image of the band—kind of like how Kiss does the makeup thing. Or how Asia Afrodesia always performs naked."

I'm almost afraid to ask, and yet I can't resist: "What are the other members' names?"

"Richard Chart, Stephen Guide, Lee Motif, and Andy Diagram every now and then when he isn't working with James."

"You *would* listen to a band like that. So, are we cool?"

"We're cool."

I point at Jan's phone. "Goodnight, Theo."

He sends me home.

**@theo**

Mini smirks up at me. "She *so* wants you."

"Shut up," I tell him, and face Thrill-Kill. "Should I call you an Uber or something?"

"That would be much appreciated, Mr. Ivanovich."

I use Jan's phone to request a ride, then open the bedroom door a crack and peek out into the quiet dark. I beckon for Thrill-Kill to follow me, through the hallway, down the stairs, and out the front door. I imagine this is what it's like when teenage boys sneak their girlfriends home at night—except Thrill-Kill's not a teenager, and she's definitely not my girlfriend.

Outside, we stand side by and wait in silence, staring off into our respective distances, she the stars, me down the street. Then:

"What's with the dungeon and the slaves and the giant block of demon-cheese?" I blurt out.

Thrill-Kill raises an eyebrow.

I wait expectantly.

"If you must know, it was a piece of cheese I let sit too long in my refrigerator."

"That doesn't explain why it's living in your dungeon—or why you have a dungeon at all, for that matter."

"Some people can't bear killing the spider they find in their pantry, and so they carry it outside instead. Live and let live. My own philosophy happens to extend to aged cheeses."

"What about your ex-husbands?"

Thrill-Kill shrugs. "They had it coming."

"And so you keep them locked up in your dungeon?"

"The poor bastards discovered Bloodcoin. It's the closest thing on God's green Earth to free money—if you can facilitate and put up with the misery of mining it. We were all good friends, once. I'm not the type to burn my bridges. I re-married, and had no problem with the men in my life mingling. Then one of them gets

altcoin fever, and suddenly they're out in the backyard digging out their own dungeon and saving poo in buckets. They've turned a simple investment into, well, what you saw under my garden shed. They've made a fortune through their own suffrage, but it's not enough. They won't give it up until it's a bull market again. They can't. Not now, not when cryptocurrency is on the brink of the mainstream. That's the gimmick—it's always another year or two off. It's always been a few years away from exploding, and it always will be." She sighs, wipes a single, unexpected tear from her cheek. "I haven't imprisoned my ex-husbands. They've imprisoned themselves."

I nod semi-knowingly. "Dark times."

Thrill-Kill's ride pulls up in front of us.

"Come by my office tomorrow," she says, "and I'll reimburse you." She stoops slightly, whispers, "Just so we're clear, if you tell anyone what you saw in my garden shed, I'll make your life a living hell. Got it, sweetie?" She pats me on the bottom—you know, just like any other everyday, ordinary guidance counselor would—and gets into the car.

I watch it pull away, then, brushing the residue of old-lady palm from my butt, I go back up to my room, where Mini and Jan are watching the news. Well, they've got the news on, but neither is paying any attention. Rather, Mini's staring intently at Jan as Jan stares intently at me.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"My apartment's back," Jan replies.

# Home

**@jan**

Oh, that's right—DXL Pro *sucks*.

It takes a while, but eventually I download fully into my parents' bedroom. My ancient, gnarled Compaq is running dutifully on the dresser. I walk over to it, wiggle the mouse. The monitor wakes up, revealing half a dozen SMN windows. Mom and Dad have been busy—their buddy list is crammed with the usernames of various friends and family members from back in Brno. It looks like anyone and everyone they've ever known is on there, and I have to wonder, is this normal? Is it normal for parents to scold their kid about uploading to other people's homes, and then go and do exactly the same thing times ten?

I leave the bedroom, stand in the doorway between the hall and the living room. After spending so much time at Theo's, my parents' apartment, never roomy to begin with, seems smaller and more underwhelming than ever. There's my desk with its peeling faux-wood laminate, my twin-size bed, my weathered dumbbells, my modest corner of home. Everything looks just as it was before the complex was towed away. Just to be sure, though, I step outside. Thankfully, the correct neighborhood stretches for blocks in both directions. Earlier, on the news, there'd been a reporter interviewing upset residents; now it's just discarded coffee cups and leftover strands of police tape draped across the grass, the bushes.

Yep. Home.

Turning, I spot the notice stuck to our front door. It reads:

Dear Resident:

> You may be aware of the recent towing. Rest assured, we've since cleared up the matter with the city. We apologize for any inconvenience, and will be offering free coffee and doughnuts in the leasing office for the rest of the week.
>
> —The Management

I fold the notice and go back inside.

The kitchen has gone from messy to disaster scenery. Setting the notice on the table, I put a load of dishes in the washer, take out the trash. Then I go for a shower. I'm one foot into the tub when it occurs to me that getting wet might not be such a good idea. I mean, I may be augmented, but I'm still *actual*, right? I won't short-circuit or anything whenever I come into contact with liquid...will I?

For a moment I stand very still and watch the rivulets of water trickling down my leg. No sparks, no flame. Which would make sense. Augmented actuality wouldn't be very useful unless the idea is to do things the way you'd normally do them when actual. Still, I'm a little nervous as I get the rest of the way in. I wonder if, in high-res, how much of me even needs a shower at this point. Like, am I cleaning the augmented bytes while my actual skin (what's left of it, anyway) goes unwashed beneath?

I make a mental note to ask Beta or Theo about that later, and finish up without any show-stoppers. Afterward, I lie in bed for a while wondering how (or if) I'm going to tell Mom and Dad what's happened to me. I roll onto my side, stare at my phone, which I'd set on the desk earlier. It's well within arm's reach, but instinct persuades me to pick it up and hold it close. I'm not one of those people who has to have their phone on them 24/7 in order to feel safe and secure, but now that I'm depending on it to be high-res whenever I'm actual, I kind of understand the 24/7 thing.

Swiping through my SMN buddy list, I watch the video feeds in passing. Eva's out like a light. Theo, too, surprisingly. Headphoned and blanketed by a layer of cookie crumbs and candy bits, Ernie's sitting slumped at his computer, and is working an Xbox controller as if his life depends on it. Everyone else seems to have slipped right back into their routines with such ease. Meanwhile, here I am feeling like...well, I'm not exactly sure. I'm home. I should feel like I'm home. Instead, it feels like my first night *away* from home. I wouldn't say I'm lonely, but I *do* kind of miss being with the gang.

I guess I doze for a while, because suddenly it's dawn, and I can hear my parents knocking around in the kitchen, conversing quietly in Czech while they make coffee:

"That's right, it's morning here in America," Dad groans.

"Has Jan done all his homework?" Mom asks.

"Let's hope so. The sooner we get him up and out the door, the sooner we can get back to the café."

"I don't think he's too happy about having his computer taken away."

"He's just enacting the Kounicova Pout."

"There's such a thing?"

"If we're not smiling, we're pouting." Dad chuckles. "It's what made you ask me if everything was all right the day we first met."

"He does have your brood. What's this?"

"A note from the management. Someone's car must've been towed by mistake."

"Not ours."

"No, not ours. Shame. Doughnuts sound good. Pass the milk."

Oh, wow. Mom and Dad really have no idea what's happened. At *all*. They've been 404 so long that they didn't notice their entire apartment complex was accidentally towed. I lost my home, my bytes, my parents, and neither of them are the slightest bit aware of any of it. They're just going through the motions, moths toward fire—or whatever the expression is—perfectly content, perfectly ignorant.

And it hits me: for the last two years it's been enough to have my own corner of the living room. It's been enough to get by on an outdated Compaq desktop, enough to do all my shopping at Dollar Tree, the 99¢ Store, Food 4 Less, Goodwill. Life here was all I ever wanted or needed.

No more.

I don't hate my parents. They've stuck with parenthood and raised me this far. But that's just it—I feel like they've been *stuck* raising me. You heard Dad: he'd much rather be having breakfast back in Brno. Is that why he never drives me to school? "He likes the exercise," he says whenever the subject comes up. I used to think he was just being playfully indifferent whenever he made comments like that. Now it's clear. Maybe I'm reading into things. Or maybe I'm finally hearing the truth. Regardless, the end result is that I'm done being the poor kid whose parents are never around. I'm going to make money somehow, get a job, move out of this place, and finally *get on* with my life. I don't need to be rich—I just want something for myself, something my parents obviously can't or don't want to provide.

I lie on my back and, staring at the ceiling, I ponder the impossibilities.

## On This, the Eve of New Year's Eve

**@eva**

Ernie's just unlocked King K. Rool in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* when Jan finishes downloading.

"What's up?" he asks, and joins us on the floor of Theo's bedroom, where we, the Runt Squad (now in its entirety), have assembled around Ernie's continental mass in what one might refer to as an impromptu pile or huddle.

Theo hands Jan a Joy-Con. "Nothing. You?"

"Nothing."

"Hi, Jan," I say, waving.

"Hi, Eva," Jan says, waving back.

"Enough chatter," Ernie grunts. "Pick your character, pixel master."

Jan chooses Cloud.

The next match begins, conversation giving way to the subtle symphony of us working our Joy-Cons.

*Click-click-click.*

"I hate when people say that," Beta murmurs after a while.

Mini, his mitts ineffectively handling his Joy-Con, asks, "Say what?"

"'Nothing.'"

"Right?" I agree.

*Click-click.*

"*Something's* always up. It's never *nothing*."

Theo nods. "True."

*Click-click-click-click.*

"Even if you're not doing anything specific or going anywhere in particular, you're always doing *something*. Breathing, for example."

*Click-click.*

"Metabolizing."

*Click-click-click.*

"Listening," Jan offers.

*Click-click-click.*

"Feeling," I say.

*Click.*

"Compiling," Theo adds.

*Click-click-click-click.*

"Farting." Ernie rips a big one.

The huddle fractures, separates—all but Beta, who's either stupider or braver than everyone else, I'm not sure.

"'Nothing' would be dead," he continues.

"Yeah. 'Nothing' would be dead," Theo agrees.

"And even then, the fact that 'nothing' can be defined at all suggests that it is, in fact, *something*—if only a means of classifying the absence of something."

Mini goes all wide-eyed. "That's heavy, guys."

I pull my shirt over my nose as the putrid tendrils of Ernie's funk tousle my hair. "Is this what we're doing, guys?"

*Click-click.*

"Spending the last hours of 2018 talking about nothing and inhaling toxic gasses?"

"Happy new year, suckers!" Ernie cackles.

"Happy new year," I mutter back.

*Click-click-click.*

# Toilet Tchaikovsky

**@mini**

Why do grown men make so much noise while taking dumps in public restrooms? I'm not talking about the actual bowel movements themselves. *All* our bottoms make noise in that respect: a squeak, a fart, maybe a *plunk!* or occasional trumpet blare. Ladies, I don't doubt that you're guilty of playing your own personal toilet Tchaikovsky a little too loudly from time to time, but what I'm talking about are the grunts and groans, the desperate pleas of, "Jesus-God-almighty!" Remember the White Water Express scene in *Vacation*? Remember Charlie Day screaming bloody murder right after he got off the phone with his fiancée? That's what's going on in restrooms across the country.

That's what's going on right now in the stall next to Theo's. (While he would have you believe otherwise, Theo does indeed evacuate his bowels on a regular basis.) And I'm just like, what *is* happening over there? What item off of Ultimate Veggie's menu could've given this bub such a massive crapaclysm?

I have to know.

Don't you?

I'm going to take a peek. I slink out of Theo's pants pocket.

"Hey!" he whispers, my unexpected appearance momentarily distracting him from his phone. "What're you doing?"

"Washing my hands," I reply, and duck under the front of the stall. But instead of heading for the sink, I make an immediate U-turn into the stall adjacent and—

—*ZOMFG.*

I'd expected a smattering of awkward.

A baseline *ew*, perhaps.

But not this.

Anything but this...this sweaty, red-faced caricature of a forty-something businessman, legs splayed, arms braced against the stall walls, tie slung haphazardly over one quivering shoulder as he bears down on an unspeakably evil stool jailbreaking his tattered rectum centimeter by ragged centimeter—

—I stumble away. Back into Theo's stall, back into the familiar warmth and geekly fibre of his oversized joggers. I scrunch my eyes shut, plug my non-existent fingers into my non-existent ears.

Let's never speak of this again.

**toilet Tchaikovsky (noun):**

**1.** loud grunting and/or strenuous vocalizations made by most men while defecating.

"*The intensity of the gentleman's toilet Tchaikovsky made it obvious that he'd consumed too much cheese as of late.*"

**2.** an album of chamber pot music by Canadian folk duet Peter Flute & Woodland Knight.

## Strike!

**@theo**

Mr. Barchetta's apparently gone picketing—as evidenced by the note scribbled on the blackboard:

*Gone picketin'.*

In his place: a TV playing *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, which the class regards with casual indifference.

"Why are the teachers on strike again?" asks one girl as she eyes the picket line through a nearby window.

I don't have anything to say (and even if I did, it's not like anyone would care), so I just listen to the older kids:

"Overcrowded classrooms."

"Budget cuts."

"Inferior toilet paper in the restrooms."

"I think old Thrailkill is doing head sessions on an SMN server because Boca Linda's too cheap to pay for her office to stay actual."

"Supposedly the librarians want money to finally get rid of that feral pit bull living in the stacks."

"You mean Kilgore?"

"I thought that was the custodian dude's helper dog."

"Knowing Boca Linda, Kilgore probably *is* the custodian."

"They lost another freshman down there the other day."

"I hear the stacks are where they send you for detention."

"Where did you hear that?"

"A friend of a friend texted another friend right before he died...on his way to *detention*."

"You think if the teachers win, we'll finally get real basketball hoops in the gym instead of just having the taller seniors hold out their arms?"

"*Huh*. I hate hoop duty."

"You think if they win, Mr. Barchetta will stop throwing chocolate kisses at us whenever we answer a question correctly?"

"If anything, he'll upgrade to peanut butter cups."

Several students snicker.

On TV, they're lowering that Thuggee dude into the lava pit.

"Why are we here if we're not learning anything?" Mini asks. He's climbed out of my pocket to watch the sacrifice scene.

"The school only gets money if there are kids in the classrooms," I reply.

Mini frowns. "So, what are we supposed to do, just sit around watching cheesy Steven Spielberg movies until three?"

"I guess."

"Nuts to that." Mini jumps onto the nearby desk of a cute senior girl. "Hey, babe. Want to smoke or have sex?"

The girl's reaction is not unlike that of the Thuggee dude hurtling toward molten lava.

*Om Namah Shivaya.*

# Human Leveraging Paradigm

**@theo**

"Internet Explorer or Firefox?" an unexpectedly-ripped Cheetos Dude asks the moment Ernie and I upload onto the Semantic Web's shiny new server.

"What the hell is Internet Explorer?" Ernie asks, genuinely bewildered.

Cheetos Dude smiles, holds up an orange-stained hand for Ernie to high-five. "Good answer, friend. You may enter."

Ernie slaps Cheetos' hand, examines the thin layer of orange that's been offset against his palm.

"Nice Goten skin, by the way," Cheetos Dude tells me, and wanders off.

I frown, glance around the Web and wonder why he thinks I look like Goten when I *clearly* don't look like Goten! (Assuming I'm not looking, Ernie's started licking the cheese offset from his hand.) It's been a while since I've stopped by, what with homework, chores, and, more recently, rescuing Eva from a giant demogorgonzola. The finer details haven't changed much: laptops, tablets, and junk food cluttering wooden spool tables arranged around a central sofa pit. The Web's post-geekly haunts, however, are almost unrecognizable. Everyone's handsome, pretty, fit, muscular, and/or overtly voluptuous. They've all got SMN skins installed.

I should mention at this point that Ernie, too, is skinned—as Drax the Destroyer.

Still licking his hand.

His new virtual self as ripped as his actual self is fat.

We find a free table and sit.

"This is where you go to chill?" Ernie asks, and drapes one arm over the back of his chair. He seems unimpressed.

I open my laptop. "Why would you skin yourself like that?"

"Why *wouldn't* I?" Ernie flexes an arm, tosses back a non-existent lock of hair.

"I'm the only one here in my actual skin."

"And whose fault is that?"

"I'm happy with who I am," I say proudly. Which was eventually true.

Explanation: like everyone else, once the SMN skins feature was rolled out, the first thing I did was scroll through the endless customizations and pre-made skins uploaded by other users—mostly celebrities, athletes, anime and video game characters. I think I spent several hours trying on big and tall, short and stocky, svelte, well-built, feminine, masculine, androgynous, Caucasian, African, Asian (or

*more* Asian, in my case), Indian, Native American...but the more skins I tried, the less sure I felt about actually *choosing* one. It's the same reason I always run around in the default skin whenever I play *GTA*. Too much choice is totally a thing. Also, while it's true everyone and their grandmother is skinning themselves these days whenever they go virtual, they're also *pointing out* that everyone's skinning themselves as a means of coping with various embarrassing shortcomings. Like, if you want to be cool, you're expected to go skinning right along with everyone else—just so they can make fun of you for it. I *do* want to be taller, older, hairier, sexier, more irresistible to girls named Eva. But the more I want it, the more I'm afraid of being called out for wanting it. So, I'm just me. Short, nondescript, woefully underage. No one can say I'm compensating for something.

I'm happy with who I am—but only because I can't decide who else to be.

"You're just enacting the human leveraging paradigm," I say.

"What's that?" Ernie asks, again unimpressed.

"My teacher mentioned it the other day. He asked me what I thought the most important thing in life is. I said happiness just because I couldn't think of anything else. He told me that's incorrect. *Erroneous* is the word he used. He said happiness is irrelevant, because deep down inside we're all just trying to get leverage, and everything we do is based on trying to dominate whoever and whatever we can. You're not confident competing socially in your actual skin, so you installed a virtual one that represents the social leverage you want to enact."

"I installed this because Marvel is big tits right now."

"Exactly. Marvel is popular, and you want to be popular. You're looking for favor. *Leverage*."

"I don't need any favors from anyone." Another flex of Drax's arm, another tossing of his mane.

"No, what I mean is, subconsciously, anything we do or say that supposedly makes us happy is an attempt at gaining favor or leverage."

"And you're so superior because you simply stuck with your default skin?"

"I'm not saying I'm superior. I'm just...saying."

Ernie leans forward. "Snarks and hipsters *just say*. Real men end their sentences with periods."

I think for a sec. "I mean, my teacher also mentioned the only way to fix the paradigm would be learning to disregard the self for the whole—which was why he was so upset at my happiness comment to begin with. And that's cool and all, people can band together to do great things, change history and whatever. But the same logic is also used to build war machines."

A stray bead of sweat tumbles over the side of Drax's pate. "What the *hell* kind of classes are you taking, junior?"

# Biologeez

**@mark**

Stu wants to know why Valentine's Day is *meh* to me.

"It's like I told that Jan kid," I say, dumping my gear into my gym bag post-practice—

"*Yawn*?" Stu interrupts.

"Aka, Chekov. From Mr. Johnson's class."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, it's like I told Chekov a while back. I knew Quan my freshman year, became her BFF, helped her with her homework, took her to the movies, took her out to eat, gave her a shoulder to cry on—I thought we were totally in love with each other. Then senior prom came up, and she ditched me for some college baller who knocked her up and split, like, immediately after. So, a year's worth of supposed *love* with me versus one night of biology with *him*. Do the math."

"She broke your heart. Human condition."

"I'm making a point. She chose biology over love. And possibly money, I don't know the guy's financials. But there was *definitely* biology involved when it came to her getting it on with him. He was bigger and better. I was love. What chance did I have?"

"Wow. Bitter much?"

"Not at all," I say. "It hurt when she dumped me, but I'm not saying she made the wrong decision or is a bitch or anything. I'm saying when it comes down to it, we all choose biology over love—whether we know it or not—because love doesn't exist. Love is a myth, an invention, a societal dance used to pretty up the basic biological urges that drive chicks and dudes to flirt with each other. Men want women who can conceive healthy babies. Women want men who can help them conceive healthy babies. Love is the excuse we use to conceive healthy babies."

Stu shakes his head, slings his bag over his shoulder. "You're never going to get laid with that attitude."

"That kind of proves my point."

"You have a point?"

I nod. "The end game when it comes to girls and dating and all that is sex, right?"

"*Duh*."

"Then what is love?"

"Do I look like a greeting card to you?"

"Love is nothing. Sex is everything. James Spader said it when he played Robert California on *The Office*. Everything we do or say is about getting laid. Knowing that, then, am I interested in procreation? No. Sex? Sure." I hold up my hand. "Already taken care of."

"Dude," Stu says. "That you'd be satisfied with your own hand rather than shell out a few bucks every now and then for a chance at making it with some lucky lady baffles me beyond belief."

I zip up my bag. "What's wrong with being single? I like being single. I *want* to be single."

"It's all fun and games and one-handed sex now, but wait until you're thirty and living alone in some sketchy off-ramp apartment. That's when I come knocking on your door to say I told you so."

"Really? Years from now you're going to take the time to drive out to wherever I'm living just to tell me that? Really?"

Stu waves his hand. "You know what I mean."

Grabbing my bag, we start slowly across the gym, toward the boys' locker room. "I'm not saying I'll never date again. I just want the girl to be into me for *me*, and not for what I give her on Valentine's Day. No false boners."

"I'm afraid to ask what those are."

"They're the various types of artificial *love* and pretense everyone throws at each other during V-Day. Like the Obvious Couple. Destined to be together from the day they first met in Kindergarten. He gave her half his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, she shared her grape juice, and they've supposedly been in *love* ever since. They'll go to prom, lose their virginity to each other, get matching scholarships, eventually settle down in the suburbs with two-point-five kids and a Tesla. Then one day they'll make the news when it comes out he's been beating her on weekends, she's been neglecting the kids due to a latent online gambling addiction. False boner."

"You're grim, dude."

"I've got more," I say. "Gay for Days. Closet Couple. The Reverse Double-Standard—that's what I had. Old Love. Old Love Lost. Can't Live With or Without You. Kindred Spirits. Us Against the World. Babysitter Bling. Long Distance Runaround. Premarital Sexposition. All false boners." I pause, spotting Eva on her way out of the gym. Theo's waiting for her near the exit. "Then there's Hopeless Romantic, played artfully by that little Theo dude. I've seen him watching her from afar, hoping, wishing, wanting..."

"Speaking of watching from afar," Stu says, "Thrailkill's been eyeing you ever since practice started."

I, too, had noticed her smoky presence earlier. Now she's left the bleachers to intercept me at the locker room entrance.

Like the wuss he is, Stu recedes to a respectful distance.

"Hello there, Mr. Howard," Thrailkill says to me, and takes a drag from what must be her fiftieth cigarette of the day.

I smile politely. "Hi, Mrs. Thrailkill."

"It's been a while since I last saw you in my office."

"I've been busy." I heft my gym bag.

"I can see that." She pinches one of my biceps, nods obviously at my lower half. "Nevertheless, I'd like to assess your...development. Say, tomorrow at three o'clock?" She leans in close, whispers into my ear, "Play your cards right, and I'll make sure you're valedictorian."

Behind her, Stu nods, gives me two thumbs up while mouthing the word "biology."

## No Guts, No Glory

**@theo**

I've decided to walk home from school today. That's how I've ended up standing on this particular street corner waiting for this particular light to change when this particular distinguished-looking middle-aged dude in a scarf and Chesterfield combo steps up beside me. I don't know him, I've never seen him before in my life, but going by his cheerful disposition and expensive demeanor, I'm guessing he's a banker or businessman, an elder statesman or bestselling literary novelist.

We wait together in silence.

Then, suddenly—

"Screw it!" Scarf Dude steps from curb to crosswalk, beckons for me to follow. "Let's jaywalk!"

"Huh?" I mumble (as is tradition whenever an adult addresses you unexpectedly).

"No guts, no glory, right? Come on, kiddo, let's grab life by the—"

—*borscht!*

A brown convertible being driven by the spit of Kurtwood Smith comes hurtling out of nowhere and not only collides with Scarf Dude, but pulverizes him on the spot, right then and there. Meaty gore washes up the windshield, douses Kurtwood, who, inexplicably, is already blood-soaked and irritable-looking as he floors the accelerator, barrels on down the street.

I back away from the curb.

This is why strangers shouldn't talk to you.

## The Quiet Room

**@eva**

I'm in the Quiet Room and doing some homework on my laptop when he enters, this heavily-bearded old dude in a baseball cap, open raincoat, and khaki shorts. He doesn't look dirty or homeless, but man, does he *stink*. I watch him via the reflection of my unnecessarily glossy laptop screen as he settles into one of the armchairs behind me and just sits there...stinking. Like, he's not reading anything or on a laptop or even using his phone. He's simply watching the room, smiling, smelling putrid, silently insinuating a thousand missed showers.

Across the way, at one of the other tables, this Asian guy holds his nose while he packs up his things and makes a beeline for the door. I'm seriously considering doing the same when Summer messages me:

**summer_girl:** What's up, babe?
**evaluscious:** Studying at the library.
**summer_girl:** Yuck. Books.
**evaluscious:** I'm more worried about the smelly guy who just walked into the room.
**summer_girl:** Ew, smelly like how?
**evaluscious:** Like the world's dirtiest armpits, crotches, and butt cracks joined forces to rally against the soap industry.
**summer_girl:** What's this guy's deal?
**evaluscious:** Dunno. He's just sitting in here.

I don't get it—why this guy's in the Quiet Room, but, more specifically, why human BO is so rank in the first place. A dirty dog stinks, but a dirty person *reeks*. Like, if I had to choose between hanging with Smelly Man or a dog that hasn't been washed in just as long, I'd definitely pick the dog. Why is that?

I ask Summer as much, watching with envy as a second patron defects from the Quiet Room.

**summer_girl:** I read somewhere that we sweat more than animals do. Sweat is basically food for all the odor-causing bacteria on our skin.

A tiny blow-horn sounds behind me, accompanied by a fresh waft of stink.

**evaluscious:** ZOMFG, Smelly Man just farted.
**summer_girl:** And you're still there because...?

Oh, I want to leave. I really do. In my laptop screen reflection, it looks like Smelly Man is smiling directly at me, waiting for me to acknowledge his stench.

**evaluscious:** I don't want him to think I'm leaving because of him.
**summer_girl:** Who cares?
**evaluscious:** It's...complicated.

Don't laugh, but here's my problem: every time I'm about to get up and leave the Quiet Room, someone else beats me to the punch, and I hesitate, not wanting it to look like I'm participating in some kind of mass exodus. One, it'll make it awkward every time I see Smelly Man from now on—he'll know I was offended, and that I left specifically to get away from him. Two, doing so would be admitting defeat in this twisted olfactory game of his. This is a public study room, not Smelly Man's own private domain. I shouldn't have to leave just because this gnarly old geezer can't control his funky BO—

*Fart!*

—I need to make it look like my exit has nothing to do with him, like I'm going for a drink of water, or maybe I need to look up something in the stacks, or I need to get better Wi-Fi by moving closer to the library's router—oh, my God. Listen to me. I sound like Theo, totally overanalyzing the situation, making a big deal out of something small. Smelly Man's probably one of those guys who doesn't realize he reeks, or who has a glandular problem. Or maybe he's allergic to chlorine in tap water. Nobody's a big enough jerk that they'd intentionally sit in a small room and stink everyone out just to do it.

This is dumb. Of *course* Smelly Man doesn't care if I come or go. Even if he does, what do I care if he cares? I'm going leave because I feel like it—

*Faa-aaa-aar...art!*

—yep, I'm definitely leaving. I slam my laptop shut, heft my backpack, get up from my seat—and in doing so, I inadvertently glance at Smelly Man.

He makes direct eye contact with me, smiles, ruffles his raincoat, and says, "Checkmate."

# Shameless Dookie Crossover Episode

**@jan**

It's the weekend, and we're having a sleepover at Ernie's—but *shh!* Don't tell our parents.

"Why's your bathroom so scungy?" Theo asks, coming back into Ernie's bedroom and looking for something to dry his hands on.

"I'm calling my grams' bluff," Ernie replies.

Eva frowns. "What? Why?"

"She's always trying to get me to clean the entire bathroom all by myself. Free child labor. It's like, she and Gramps drop anchor and floss their dentures in there, too! Why should *I* have to clean up after everyone?"

"Um, because they took you in after your parents died—"

"Wal-Mart stampede!"

"—and are putting a roof over your head, food in your big fat mouth."

"Well, aren't you the insightful little tart."

Beside me, Theo sits cross-legged on his sleeping bag. He still looks mighty concerned about his wet hands, and is holding them out in front of him like he just got his nails done. I also notice that he's the only one wearing socks at this point, even though he's otherwise dressed down for the night like the rest of us. I think he's definitely the most offended by the mess in Ernie's bedroom. Conversely, I'm the least offended simply because, coming from my little corner of my parents' living room, having a whole bedroom to ourselves is like being in some kind of heaven. A shag-carpeted, wood-paneled, crumb-infested, piles-of-laundry-everywhere kind of heaven.

"Anyway," Ernie continues, "before Theo defeated my grams and turned her into a cardboard cutout, she used to say that if I didn't clean the toilet as part of my chores, a poop monster would climb out of the bowl and crap in my mouth."

"She did *not* say that," Eva insists.

"Well, she used lamer language, but the gist of it was still there." Ernie shakes his head, pops a handful of Little Debbie into his mouth. "Stupid Grams. How dumb does she think I am? Any poop monster pops out of my toilet, I'm taming that sucker and making it my pet monster."

"I thought your pet monster was a Bang-U-Bot 5000," Theo says.

"There's no rule that says you can't have *multiple* pet monsters."

"Or that pet monsters even exist," I point out.

Theo looks thoughtful. "Most fairy tales and urban myths are based at least in

part on real things." He takes out his phone.

"What are you doing?" asks Eva.

"A Web search for 'poop monster.' So far it's just pictures of babies...and a book called *Dookie* by some dude named Jesse Gordon."

(I'm not sure why, but for a split second the four of us deadpan an imaginary camera.)

Ernie shifts on his belly. "That's lovely. Bug eyes, dear, please pass the Toblerone."

"What Toblerone?"

"The one you're sitting on."

Eva frowns, irked that unsuspecting chocolate has been tucked under her leg this whole time. She passes it to Ernie, checks beneath her other leg just in case there are stragglers.

"Fecal golem," Theo says.

We all look at him.

"Your poop monster, Ernie. It's actually called a fecal golem."

"Where did you read that?" I ask.

"*Dookie*. I bought the book and did a keyword search combined with some speed-reading."

Ernie's jaw drops. "You *paid* for literature?"

"It was only ninety-nine cents."

"*Only* ninety-nine cents? Screw you, Jesse Gordon!"

(Strange. Another deadpan.)

Theo goes on. "The book mentions that a golem in general is 'a creature ordained from out of innate material or an inanimate object. Usually mud, or clay, or, rarely, human feces.'"

"You speed-read all that?"

"The book's only, like, twenty pages long."

"Do y'all realize what this means?" Ernie looks at me and Eva expectantly.

"That Theo's nerdism has reached new width?" I offer.

"*Heights*," Theo says, starting to correct me—

"No!" Ernie shouts. "It means we could actually, conceivably, scientifically summon our very own pet monster!"

"Why would anyone want a poop monster as a pet?" I ask.

"Why *wouldn't* anyone want a poop monster? Think about it. People spend all their time locking their doors, securing their windows, installing fancy security cameras, but nobody gives a damn about their pipes. The world's pipes are basically wide open. Your ordinary burglars, vandals, angry ex-husbands, and rapists have to pick a lock or break a window to get inside your house. Meanwhile, a poop monster is just a flush away from anyone and everyone in town. I mean, who doesn't have a toilet in their home in this day and age? Besides Janny Boy here?"

I frown at him. "My toilet's cleaner than yours, leviathan."

Ernie ignores me, turns to Theo. "How do we summon the poop monster?"

Theo does some more speed-reading. "The characters in the book do it by puking into a bowl of poo while listening to Mass Dismemberment's *Golem* album."

"That's the grossest thing I've ever heard," Eva sighs.

"*You're* the grossest thing you've ever heard," Ernie tells her.

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"*You* don't even make sense!"

"Ernie!"

He snickers. "That's what she said in bed last night—"

"*Ugh!*"

"That, too."

"Guys, I found the album," I say.

About to go at it with Ernie, Eva instead blinks at me. "*Golem*?"

"Yeah." I hold up my phone for everyone to see, pass it to Theo, who passes it to Ernie, who passes it to Eva, who passes it back to me again. No one speaks. We just look at each other, an obvious suggestion hanging unasked in the silence.

Ernie eventually puts it into words: "I totally dare one of you to summon a fecal golem."

Eva wrinkles up her nose. "I am *not* puking into a bowl full of do."

"Neither am I," Theo agrees.

They fist-bump, then look at me.

"I'll do it," I say, shrugging.

"Yes!" Ernie wobbles into a vaguely upright position, holds out his hand for me to high-five. "Three cheers for the dirty Czech!"

"Guys, no—*no*." Theo waves his hands desperately in the air. "We are *not* pooping and puking into a toilet bowl just because the Internet says we should."

*Three minutes later...*

The four of us are in the bathroom and standing around the unflushed toilet. Ernie's just finished taking a massive dump (before you ask, we waited outside for that part), and is obviously appreciating the sheer amount of waste material his bowels have produced. I have to admit, as gross as the whole thing is, I'm kind of impressed that he was able to go on cue like that.

Theo pulls his shirt up over his mouth and nose.

Her phone's camera pointed squarely at the toilet, Eva gives me a thumbs-up. "Ready."

"Strut your stuff, closet jock." Ernie pats me on the back.

I kneel uncertainly in front of the toilet and load up the first track from *Golem* on my phone. I clear my throat, roll my tongue around inside my mouth. "How do I...?"

"You've got to stick your finger down your throat," Theo says.

Ernie shakes his head. "Dork, it has to be someone else's finger, or it won't

work."

"That doesn't sound right—"

"Try thinking of the fattest girl you know naked."

"Do you have any ipecac?" Eva asks.

"No, no. You're overcomplicating things. Just drink a whole gallon of milk while doing a handstand over the toilet."

Is it just me, or are their suggestions getting worse? "I'm trying the finger thing," I say, and lean forward, jam half my hand down my throat for good measure—a little *too* good, I'm guessing, because suddenly I'm spewing chunks like no one's business, onto the seat, into the bowl, down most of my forearm. When I'm through, I grab a wad of toilet paper, dab at my mouth, peer into the toilet, which is a smelly, grotesque mess. But otherwise about as magical as, well, an unflushed toilet.

"Huh." Ernie grabs my phone, aims the speaker inside the bowl. "Are you sure you actually puked?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"Like, it wasn't, er, pre-puke or something?"

I glare up at him, teary-eyed, snot dribbling down my upper lip. "I most definitely threw up."

Theo shrugs. "Maybe we should flush."

"In due time, junior," Ernie grunts.

"No, I mean in the book, the characters are always trying to flush the toilet when things, er, go wrong."

Ernie yanks the handle.

The tank starts to empty.

I scuffle back from the toilet along with everyone else.

It starts to overflow...and that's it. No magic, no monsters. Just poop-water spilling over the sides of the bowl and splashing loudly onto the floor.

Theo yelps and dives clumsily into the bathtub.

Mass Dismemberment's lead singer yells something unintelligible at the top of his lungs..

"It didn't work," Ernie murmurs, dumbfounded, as the bathroom floods lazily.

"That's because this is real life," Eva says, scowling at him from behind her phone.

"I really thought it would work..."

I sigh. Normal kids our age experiment with booze or drugs.

We experiment with poop.

# Mother's Day: A Toilet Tchaikovsky B-Side

**@theo**

Bathroom time is no longer sacred. I realize this as, having just closed the stall door and unbuckled my belt, Ernie suddenly and unexpectedly downloads into the stall with me, his bulk knocking me aside.

"Hey, slut, what are you...?" he trails off, noticing his surroundings. "Are you taking a dump?"

I twist around, fumble my pants back into position. "Dude! A little privacy, please?"

"Where are we?" Ernie Play-Dohs past me and peers curiously through the crack in the stall door.

"I'm at the Saffron Truffle with my parents."

"Wow, so this is what rich people restaurant bathrooms look like—oh, my fuchsia, are those *mints* over by the towels?"

"We're not—this isn't—it's for Mother's Day, Stay Puft."

"Don't act like you're not here every night. Is that hand lotion free, or do they put it on your bill?"

I can hear someone else entering the restroom. I lower my voice to an insistent whisper: "Shouldn't you be doing something for Mother's Day? *Away* from here?" I try to reach for my phone, but it's stuck in my pocket, what with Ernie pressed against me like so much sweaty ham.

"Off the hook," he whispers back. "Parents died in a Wal-Mart stampede."

"What about your grams?"

"She doesn't count."

"Of course she does. Grandmothers are still mothers."

Ernie looks thoughtful. "Huh. I guess I could have her laminated."

I glare at him.

"Hey, my grandmother's a cardboard cutout. My options are limited."

Shaking my head, I try to work my hand between my thigh and Ernie's, my fingers searching desperately for the opening to my pocket—

—and now Jan's suddenly downloaded unannounced, displacing me further into Ernie's soft mass.

"Hey, Theo, can I borrow some rubber gloves—" He cuts himself off. "What's everyone doing in here?"

Ernie wriggles his arm free, points at the top of my head. "Little China here's taking a dump."

I push back against him. It's like pressing into warm dough—half my face is tucked between his breasts. "Doesn't everyone have better things to do than watch me use the toilet?"

"What're you doing for Mother's Day, Janny Boy?"

"The dishes," Jan replies with a shrug.

"That's it?" I ask, my voice muffled. "Doing the dishes is your Mother's Day present?"

"You've never seen our dirty dishes."

Eva's voice emanates from my pocket: "Theo, do you have a second to—"

"Don't download—*don't download!*" I yell.

("Excuse me?" comes a surprised voice from the next stall over.)

"Why not?" Eva asks.

"There's not enough room in the toilet stall," Jan offers.

"Wait, what now?"

"I'll explain later," I sigh.

# Nightnoise

(Based on a true story.)

**@jan**

"It sounds like a three-year-old riding a skateboard without any wheels," Dad groans.

I shake my head. "No, it's more like a chair being dragged around on a very thin blanket."

"That—*that* right there," Mom adds, listening. "What could that *possibly* be?"

I take a bite of pizza. My parents and I are, on this rare occasion, sitting crammed together at the small breakfast table in the kitchen. We're having takeout for dinner (Mom doesn't cook anymore since getting hooked on SMN). Meanwhile, our new upstairs neighbors are moving around very, *very* loudly. Putting things away. Building and arranging furniture. Playing hopscotch. Running relays back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

It's been like this for three weeks.

"No normal human beings make that much noise," Dad says. I can tell he's upset because he's been holding the same slice of uneaten pepperoni for no less than fifteen minutes. Also, his partial comb-over is starting to unravel itself. "*Sakra!* These are the worst neighbors we've ever had!"

"Maybe not the *worst*," I say. "Remember the woman who used to leave her garbage outside her front door for days on end? The one who played the tuba every night?"

*Bam! Bam! Bam!* goes the ceiling above.

Dad shakes his head. "This is definitely worse."

*Haaaaack!!*

"It's also an architecture thing," I continue. "Depending on how it's built, a downstairs apartment basically becomes a giant drum regardless of how quiet you try to be. We might sound just like that if we lived upstairs."

"No, we wouldn't."

I chew thoughtfully for a moment, listening to the sound of a heavy treasure chest being dragged across a spread of marbles.

Followed by:

*Zoom! Pow! Whoa!*

"Explain that one!" Dad tosses his pizza back into the box. "There's nothing in heaven or on Earth that should make a noise like that!" He gets to his feet. "I've had enough. I'm going up there."

Mom and I watch as he stomps angrily out of the apartment. He returns exactly three minutes later, clothes ruffled, hair a little more salt than pepper, eyes bloodshot, a decade added to his overall demeanor. He doesn't quite look like he's been injured in a fight or accident—he's not bruised or bloody or anything. If I had to describe him using a popular movie title, it would be *Dazed and Confused*.

"What happened?" I ask.

"My God," he breathes. "It's full of stars."

# Take My Breath Away

**@mini**

On any given school day, you can tell who's finished their homework and/or chores first by who's downloaded to our favorite table outside 3 Hags' Doughnuts. Today, that just so happens to be Ernie and Theo. Well, Theo wanted to do Pho Goodness' Saké, but Ernie would have none of it. His exact words were, "I'm not blowing my allowance money on what is essentially meat-sweat when I can have the actual meat instead." That turned into an argument ending with 3 Hags' as a compromise. Somehow. For the record, I was up for finding a massage parlor, but I guess this place has its charm. It got 4.8 stars on Yelp, though I suspect .8 of those stars are due to the gingerbread house décor, because while my cruller's good, it's not great—a common ailment at places that offer gluten-free alternatives on an otherwise gluten-enriched menu. Gluten-free is always an afterthought, just like chicken at burger joints, vegetarian at pho restaurants.

"Advertising is such bunk," Ernie says, upset despite the large milkshake and half-dozen pastries laid out before him.

Theo's selection is more conservative (and, yes, hipster): gluten-free muffin and green tea latte. "You say everything is bunk," he points out.

"That's because everything *is* bunk. But advertising, especially." Ernie points to the strip mall across the street. There's a large poster in the window of a cell phone store showing two gorgeous college girls laughing and dancing together while sharing a pair of earbuds. Two chicks, one phone, in other words.

"Everyone looks better and has whiter teeth in advertisements than in real life," Theo says.

"Oh, I don't care about any of *that*."

"Your porn collection begs to differ," I say with a smirk.

Theo glares at me while replying to Ernie: "Then what?"

Inserting a handful of Danish into his mouth, Ernie says, "Just look at the tarts! Who shares a pair of earbuds between a single phone and dances to music like that? No one, that's who!"

"You're both twelve, and I'm plush," I suggest. "How do we know what college girls do with their free time?"

"Doesn't matter! A baby could call out the blatant inaccuracy of that poster! Clearly both girls are rich enough and white enough—"

"Racism," Theo interjects.

"—for each to be able to afford her *own* phone, her *own* earbuds. Unless they're

going to make out immediately after, why would they put up with *one* earbud per person, *one* playlist on *one* phone? Totally unrealistic!"

"Ads aren't supposed to be real. That's why they're ads."

"Can you *imagine* a world where people use the things they buy the way they're portrayed in commercials? Office jockeys off-roading to work every morning in their Jeep Grand Cherokees? Supermodels having orgasms while lathering Herbal Essences into their hair? Everything in cheesy slow-motion?" Ernie thinks for a sec. "Can you imagine if I ate this Danish all commercial-style?" He grabs Theo's phone—

"Hey!" Theo yells, nearly spilling his tea.

—waves at him dismissively. "Relax, Goten. I'm just putting on a little music." He searches for a moment, sets the phone back down. Berlin's "Take My Breath Away" starts playing. Trying to move in slow-motion, trying to look sexy, he picks up his Danish, teases one edge with the tip of his tongue. With his free hand, he removes his beanie, tosses it aside; he leans back, pretends to shake out a non-existent mane of unbridled hair. He braces the Danish above his gaping mouth—at which point a large chunk breaks off and falls directly into his windpipe. For a second he just freezes, bug-eyed, unable to suspend his disbelief that his breath has literally been taken away. He starts chewing with his neck. Or trying to, anyway. When that doesn't work, he jerks forward and chokes loudly. Like some kind of gasping, grotesque *piñata*, he manages to cough up the Danish, as well as several undigested bits of Skittle and Gummy.

Theo clears his throat. "I've never seen that commercial."

"I think I have Danish Lung," Ernie rasps.

## Let Grandma Hong Pick It Out

**@theo**

When it comes to electronics, my family has decided to run with that ancient Chinese proverb: "Let Grandma Hong pick it out." She's neither tech-savvy nor does she handle sales reps with some kind of fancy conversational *kung fu*; she's simply good at picking things out. I can't explain it better than that. When I was ten, my parents allowed me to choose their flat-screen TV. Aware of my overtly nerdish tendencies, they figured I'd be better at it than they could ever hope to be. I based my choice on technical specs, product reviews, and brand name. We brought the flat-screen home, set it up in their bedroom—and the thing bricked itself six months later. The Blu-ray player I meticulously researched played a grand total of thirty discs and then no more. The headphones I assured Dad were more than worth the two-hundred-dollar price tag? Sound only comes out of both speakers if he's facing forward and keeping perfectly still.

Meanwhile, Grandma Hong's flat-screen from 2008 is still going strong.

Her flip-phone from around the same time still holds a charge.

Her bargain-basket PC, though rife with desktop icons, has never had so much as a case fan replaced.

Everything she picks just *works*.

Forever.

That's why Dad and I are standing here in the audio aisle of Macro Central, watching and waiting patiently for her to decide which new boombox is going to replace the one that somehow blew a woofer playing Yanni during one of Mom's aromatherapy sessions with a client.

Grandma Hong ponders the store shelf.

Waits.

Lifts one of the demos.

Puts it back.

Waits some more.

Finally points. "I like that one. It's purple."

And that's that. No rhyme, no reason. Just a silent, shared understanding that the boombox she's chosen today will still be in perfect working condition ten years from now.

Dad nods solemnly, motions for me to grab the corresponding box from the shelf and carry it to checkout. Not because it's the boombox Mom likes or needs or will even do half of what she wants.

But because Grandma Hong picked it out.
Because it's purple.

# VHS

**@theo**

"It's the early nineties or something. You can tell because I'm wearing a neon-pink tank top, bike shorts, and sneakers. And I've got an epic flat-top. I'm in my parents' house. Instead of my mom's yoga studio, the living room is an actual living room, with a couch, coffee table, and everything. I'm kneeling in front of the VCR, and am hastily fast-forwarding through a stack of videotapes. David Arkenstone, David Lanz, Mars Lasar, Patrick O'Hearn, John Tesh, and Yanni have formed the ultimate New Age supergroup, and are doing a live concert on PBS that's coming on in *five minutes*, and I've just *got* to record it, or else the known world will come to an end. But all I can find are tapes with half an hour here, ten minutes there between episodes of *Mr. Belvedere* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—you know, important stuff I'm not about to erase—nothing, though, with enough space for a full ninety-minute concert.

"The best I can come up with is half an hour at the end of a TDK T-120 tape crammed with a handful of really good *Baywatch* episodes. Here's the thing: that's in SP mode. I *could* use SLP mode to get a full ninety minutes of recording time, but the sound and video quality would be terrible. So, I'm stuck with, like, a minute to go before the concert starts, and I have to decide if I'm going to record the full show using crap SLP, or the first half-hour in high quality using SP.

"What does the dream mean?"

Dr. Chandelier shifts loudly in his leather armchair, thinks for a sec. "Ever hear of a wet dream, my boy?"

I blush. "Yeah."

"This would be the exact opposite of that."

# Crotch Cookie

**@mini**

I wake in the middle of the night to find that Theo's...well, there's no right way to say this, so I'm just going to say it: he's nocturnal-emissioned all over me. Which is my fault for dozing off beside his crotch in the first place, but still. Come *on*.

I sit up, nudging him hard.

He shifts onto his side, blinks groggily at me in the light of the alarm clock. "Huh?"

"Thanks for the free car wash," I say, and nod toward his midsection.

More blinking, another "huh?"—and then, realizing what's happened, Theo comes fully awake, rolls out of bed, stumbles to his feet. "Oh, geez, oh, man, oh, sorry, *sorry!*" He rushes over to his desk, returns with a box of Kleenex. "I'm *so* sorry, Mini. Really, I am..."

Taking a wad of tissue, I dab at my face. I'll admit, I'm appreciative of the sentiment as well as the audacity of a boy apologizing to his pocket puppet in the middle of the night. Regardless: *yuck*. After a few minutes spent ineffectively cleaning myself up, I suggest the washing machine. No, not suggest—*demand*.

Nodding, Theo grabs me, the blanket (also victimized), and we sneak quietly down to the garage. He sets me on the washer, opens the lid, starts cramming in the sullied blanket.

"Was it a good one, at least?" I ask.

"What?" Theo mumbles.

"The dream. Was it a good one?"

He blushes, doesn't say anything as he preps the washer.

"Bro, you don't just spritz a guy and then not tell him why."

Theo bites his lip.

"Let me guess. You and Eva were doing it."

"Not exactly."

"You and Eva were naked together, then."

He bites his lip again; blood trickles down his chin. "Kind of."

"'Kind of' doesn't exist. You were either naked or you weren't."

"Were."

"Well?"

"It was...weird."

"Most dreams are."

"Yeah, but this was..." Theo trails off. "We were doing yoga in my mom's studio

—"

"Naked yoga."

"—and we stopped to take a break. We sat down together on my mat. For some reason I had chocolate chip cookies with me, and I asked if Eva wanted one. She said yes, but as I was handing it to her, it fell onto my crotch. I started to tell her I'd get her a new cookie, but she just reached out, grabbed the crotch one, and popped it into her mouth." Theo swallows hard. "That's when I...I...er, um—"

"Unlocked your achievement?"

He looks away in acknowledgment as he knocks me into the washer, grabs the detergent.

I right myself in the tub.

So.

"You're going to try the cookie thing on her, aren't you?" I ask.

Theo frowns, measures out the soap. "Of course not."

"Of course not."

"That's dumb."

"*Looodicrous.*"

He dumps the soap in, closes the lid over my head.

Opens it again a moment later. "Do you think she likes chocolate chip?"

I glower at him. "Wash me, please."

# The Science of Uneating

**@beta**

I download to find the little dude's sitting cross-legged on his bed bare-mattress-style.

"Oh, uh, hey," he says when he sees me, looking like I've just interrupted some kind of Zen meditation session.

"Hey. What're you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep. You?"

"Munchies." I hold up the chocolate peanut butter rice crispy treat I'm currently working through. "What happened to your bed?"

"Oh, uh...stupid Ernie left a, um...pie under the pillow. I had to throw everything in the wash."

A perfectly viable explanation.

I sit myself on the floor, take a hearty bite of chocolate-peanut butter.

"That's a lot of sugar for the middle of the night," Theo points out.

"Doesn't matter when you're virtual," I say. "Besides, I can't stand being an uneater."

"Uneater?"

"Mm-hm. Want a piece?"

Theo shakes his head.

"Anyway, yeah, an uneater. As in someone who uneats all the food they bring home. When I was still actual, I used to have a *huge* problem with uneating. I wasn't bulimic or on a diet or anything. I ate all the time. It's just that a lot of the food I bought ended up uneaten and, eventually, thrown away.

"Personally, I blame Igor's Baked Goods—the one off of 170th and Yerba—for my uneating. That's where I used to get my crispy treats. I didn't *mean* to leave them in my fridge until they went badder than bad. Really, I didn't. But when it comes to uneating, there's a natural sort of progression at work that initiates a chain of events as inevitable as they are irreversible. Igor's started off with a great recipe: artisan peanut butter, dark chocolate, lightly-sweetened rice crispy treat. It was a perfect marriage. Expensive, but delicious as heck. Then, for twice the price, they switched to Reese's-grade peanut butter, war-time milk chocolate, and a rice crispy treat layer with enough marshmallow to make Stay Puft himself weep. Think about it—you go from a nice little treat you can easily scarf with your lunch to this slab of high-fructose corn syrup and filler that you can only eat half of before getting sick to your stomach. So, you stick the remaining half in the fridge

and tell yourself that you'll finish it tomorrow, once you recover from today's half. Only you haven't fully recovered by tomorrow. So, you put it off for day three. Only on day *three*, the crispy treat's paper wrapper has begun to stick to the chocolate and peanut butter, the oils and sugars have begun to congeal, thereby making it even less enticing than it was the day before. But you know you don't want to waste it—tomorrow, you promise. Tomorrow you'll finish it once and for all. Day four comes, and you're still not in the mood for sweets, but screw it, you'll eat the chocolate peanut butter rice crispy treat—you paid ten bucks for the darned thing. But now it tastes and smells like fridge, and so you end up throwing it away —

"—only to find yourself driving home from Igor's later that very afternoon.

"*With another chocolate peanut butter rice crispy treat in your hand.*"

Theo frowns. "Can I get you a glass of milk or a therapist or anything?"

"*Har-har*, little dude."

# Quaking

**@jan**

Everyone video chats me at the same time:

"Dude!"

"Earthquake!"

"Do you feel it?"

Huh. My bed's shaking; the vertical blinds in the living room window are swinging back and forth. To be fair, though, the apartment complex where I live is made of *papier-mâché*—we get the same rocking and rolling from passing trucks all the time. "Yeah."

"Aren't you scared?" Eva asks, her normally bulbous eyes now utterly bulging from their sockets. Behind her, Jack Skellington and company sway drunkenly. Further back, glass shatters loudly, a lamp falls from the bedside table, a bookshelf empties itself onto the floor.

"That doesn't look safe," I tell her.

"Says the guy just chilling in bed at three in the afternoon without a shirt!" Ernie screams. His cheeks and chin are jiggling.

"It's hot. We're trying to keep our AC bill down."

"You just can't stand not showing off when the rescuers come to pull your taught, rippling corpse from the wreckage after!"

I squint at Ernie's feed. "Why does it look like you're in a tent?"

"You *wish* you had a tent!"

"Did you build a fort in your bedroom?"

Ernie blinks, goes all deer and headlights. Then, sarcastically: "Yes, Jan, I built and am hiding inside a fort during an earthquake!"

Theo calls him on it. "Holy crap, you *have* built a fort, haven't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Dude, you're almost thirteen. Why are you still building forts?"

"Why are *you* dressed like Wesley Crusher?"

A bead of sweat rolls down Theo's forehead. "What're you talking about?"

"Wait a minute—yeah," Eva adds. She leans in close to her phone, studying Theo's feed. "You're in uniform—and is that the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*?"

Beta leans into frame for a sec. "The bridge of the *Enterprise*-D, to be exact."

Theo shoos him away from the conn.

The earthquake subsides.

Ernie continues to jiggle regardless. "*That's* your disaster plan? Go virtual on a

hard drive that may or may not be crushed, washed away, or electrified during a natural disaster?"

Theo glances over his shoulder, squirms inside of his acting ensign's uniform. "At least I didn't build a *fort*."

"Shut up, Wesley!"

## Anti-Wes

**@theo**

I don't know why, in the midst of a California quake, my instinct was to upload to Beta's SMN server, but here I am. In uniform. Sitting at the conn aboard the starship *Enterprise*. I look over at ops, where Beta has hooked up a Playstation controller to his console. He's playing *Super Metroid* on the main viewscreen. Other than the two of us, the bridge is empty.

"Welcome aboard, Ensign Ivanovich," Beta greets without taking his eyes off the game. "What do you think of the *Enterprise*-D?"

I swivel around in my chair. "Pretty legit."

"I've been working on it in my spare time. The lower decks still need to be done, sickbay's a mess, but all the other important bullet points are finished. The bridge, engineering, Ten Forward, transporter room 3, the holodeck—"

"Wait—the holodeck? So, like, a server within a server?"

Beta shrugs. "It just uploads you to other SMN servers at the moment." He reaches a save station, then puts down his controller, stretches in his seat. "What brings you to my humble abode, little dude?"

Not about to reveal that an earthquake scared me virtual, I shrug and say, "I just wanted to see where you hang out when you're, uh...hanging out." Frowning down at my gray acting ensign's uniform: "How come I'm doing the Wesley Crusher thing?"

"Not a Wes fan?"

"I don't know. He was okay, I guess."

"Don't go hating on the Crusher."

"He had potential," I say, "but his story arc wound up being *meh* in the end. Like, he was supposed to be the boy genius, right? Nerdy, kind of an outcast, had a single mom, was always trying to fit in with the adults, trying to prove himself. You've got these great ingredients for a character—but somewhere between seasons two and three of *TNG*, Wes skipped confident and went straight to cocky. He acted like this entitled rich white boy flying Starfleet's luxury cruise-liner for kicks. I mean, 'I always get an A'? Calling Barclay 'Broccoli'? Killing Cadet Albert while at the Academy just so he could fit in with the cool crowd? Throwing a temper tantrum and following the Traveler into eternity because mere mortality wasn't good enough for him? *Dick*."

Beta looks disappointed. "I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"You *do* hate Wesley Crusher."

"I don't *hate*...I mean, I guess I wish...sometimes he just seems like..." I sigh. "Yeah. I hate Wesley Crusher."

# A-ha

**@eva**

"*A*-ha."
"A-*ha*."
"*A*-ha."
"A-*ha*."
"*A*-ha."
"A-*ha*—"

"*What are you two doing?*" I exclaim, glaring at my phone with some serious hate-face.

Theo and Mini blink back at me.

"We're trying to work out how the band A-ha pronounces their name," Theo says.

"Are you *kidding* me?" I hold up my hand, start counting off on my fingers. "Phone! Google search! Answer!"

Mini shakes his head. "And forfeit the thrill of discovery?"

"Yeah, Eva," Theo adds. "Where's the fun in that?"

"*A*-ha."
"A-*ha*."
"*A*-ha."
"A-*ha*..."

*Ugh.* I pick up my phone, tap the Twitter icon:

When SuperMegaNet's always-on connection feels more like a bug rather than a feature. #frustrated

# Do Puppets Dream of Plush Sheep?

**@mini**

As much as he'd have you believe otherwise, Theo does in fact sleep on a regular basis. I, on the other hand, don't. Stuffing for brains—literally. Hence the expression, "Plush don't sleep." And yet I still have thoughts, I can still *think*. I can still go out of my mind with boredom waiting for morning. On most nights I'll just watch some Flix or play video games. Sometimes I do yoga. Tonight I'm chilling in Ten Forward on Beta's *Enterprise*-D server.

He joins me at my table. "Up a little late?"

I nod, frowning. "I suck at planet-naming."

"Planet-naming?"

"Yeah. I'm working on a short story as part of an online writer's workshop I'm attending."

"I didn't know you were a writer."

"Not sure if I'm a *writer*, but I do write. Fan fiction. *Star Trek* stories, in particular. I even came up with my own publishing house name. 'Cream-Colored Coffee Cup, LLC.' CxIV, for short."

"Why 'Cream-Colored Coffee Cup?'"

"Because I *love* cream-colored coffee cups. Everything tastes better from a cream-colored coffee cup. Chocolate is richer, coffee is more robust, tea just goes down smoother." I stare intently at my composition book. "I may have a touch of synesthesia."

Beta thinks for a moment. "You being a plush representation of Theo's subconscious and all, does that mean he secretly wants to write *Star Trek* stories and drink out of cream-colored coffee cups?"

"Total closet homotrektual. And he *adores* cream-colored coffee cups."

"I'll have to remember that come his birthday."

I stare at my notebook some more.

Various bots make idle conversation at the other tables.

"You look constipated," Beta observes.

"Characters, plot, narrative, dialogue, the perfect story title—I'm good on my first draft," I reply. "But planet-naming? *Blarg*. I have two prominent worlds in my story, and so far the best I can come up with is Planet A and Planet B. Some authors can never think of titles for their books. Me, I can't name a planet to save my life. Where do I even begin?"

"Dude, this is *Trek* we're talking about. Just throw something together. How

old are you?"

"I may have only recently manifested in physical form, but I've been around since Theo's first breath."

"So, twelve?"

"Twelve."

"Now, how tall are you?"

"Eight inches."

"Okay. Eight and twelve. What are the names of two of your best friends?"

"Ernie and Eva."

Beta spreads his arms proudly. "I give you Ernie VIII and Eva XII. Simples, littler dude."

If you look real carefully in the subdued lighting, you'll see a tiny puff of smoke wafting from my head—that's the departure of any sort of creative and/or academic respect I might've ever had for Beta.

I close my composition book, shift in my lame-gray acting ensign's threads. "Do you have butt and shoulder pads in your uniform, too?"

Beta nods. "I'm guessing it's for the same reason college wrestlers wear singlets during competition—people come for the match, stay for the bulges."

"*Touché.*"

# Nightmare Clients

**@theo**

*Sigh.*

Face-down on my bed, arms and legs splayed, phone clutched wearily in my hand, I swipe through my SMN buddy list. It's been One of Those Days. I really need to decompress, but my next appointment with Freud is almost a week away, so I'm going to have to settle for the next best thing: Ernie. He may not be the best dispenser of advice, but he *does* listen...in his own way. I guess.

I download expecting the usual shag carpeting and wood paneling of the Womack household, but instead I find myself at the Taqueria of Lost Souls. Ernie's seated at the counter. He's brought his PC, and is scarfing nachos while playing *Hella War*.

I sit beside him tentatively. "You brought your computer to your taco dealer?"

"Internet's decent enough," Ernie replies, "and the food's way better than what my dusty ol' grandparents stock our fridge with. Why are you here?"

"Bad day at work."

"You're twelve. You don't have to go to work."

"You know what I mean. Got a minute?"

"No, but I'm sure *they* do." Ernie points at a small gathering of white plastic lawn furniture set off to one side of the taco stand. Five geek-looking dudes have claimed one of the tables, and are looking every bit as morose as the last time I saw them.

"Who are they again?" I ask Ernie.

"Twitterpated, Stood-Up Download Dater, Sexless Gamer, Facebooked, and Self-Published Author."

"We're the lost souls after which this taco stand was named #RandomThoughts #404," Twitterpated clarifies, gazing into the perennial twilight beyond the taqueria's cactus-lined perimeter.

Ah, that's right. It's all coming back to me now.

I walk over to the table; the Lost Souls make room for me to sit.

"What's on your mind?" asks Facebooked.

"Nightmare clients," I reply.

Everyone nods in unison.

"The bane of the freelance community," Author says.

"Yep, been there, done that," Facebooked adds.

Dater puts his arm around my shoulders. "Spill it, little brother."

(Over at the counter, Ernie rips a big one, doesn't bother to excuse himself.)

I clear my throat. "Well, uh...it's just been a bad week, I guess. I had a client weasel out of payment after I'd delivered their Web site on time and fully functional. Another guy contacted me for a pretty hefty project, and when I gave him a preliminary quote, he told me his last webmaster only charged thirty bucks in 1999, how come prices were suddenly so high a mere twenty years later? Then I had this other client who'd hired me to do a site for her last month, and who insisted on all kinds of free work this week, and if I didn't do it she was going to go to all her friends and tell them what a lousy human being I am."

Author nods knowingly. "I once had a ghostwriting client declare bankruptcy and enter the Witness Protection Program to get out of paying me for my work."

"My clients like to claim they have no recollection of ever having hired me," adds Gamer.

Dater does a Western accent: "'Whoa there, Jesse James! If I'd known you were going to charge me for your time, I never would've contacted you!' Direct quote."

"I had a client who kept sending me boxes of expensive candy in the mail," says Facebooked. "When I finally insisted on our agreed-upon *monetary* payment, she told me she was breaking up with me, and that I should go screw myself."

Everyone looks at Twitterpated.

Who takes a slow, calculated sip of *horchata*.

And is totally serious as he says, "I was tech support for a Dalek mothership. #truestory #drwho"

## The Woodland Knight Discography

**@theo**

"I just torrented the entire Woodland Knight discography."
Which is as follows:

- *Woody Keeps the Beat* (1964)
- *Woody Plays It Safe* (1964)
- *Woody Gets Home in Time for Bed* (1965)
- *Woody Helps with the Chores* (1966)
- *Woody Phones It In* (1966)
- *Woody Pays His Taxes* (1967)

"Now, Woodland's first six albums were pretty tame. According to his Wikipedia page, his manager wanted to cultivate a wholesome, boy-next-door, Boy Scout kind of vibe: crew-cut, letterman jacket, strong family and community values. But when *Woody Pays His Taxes* became the worst-performing album of all time, Woodland fired his manager and effectively reinvented himself with *The Woodland Knight Album*. A string of folk and soft rock gems followed over the next fifty years. Jackson Browne, Dan Fogelberg, Gordon Lightfoot, Cat Stevens, Al Stewart—they all came and went. But Woodland Knight just...*made music*."

- *The Woodland Knight Album* (1968)
- *Pavlova* (1969)
- *Chantilly Daydream* (1970)
- *Paisley* (1971)
- *Darjeeling with Cordelia* (1973)
- *Thoughts & Wine* (1974)
- *The Titmouse Said* (1975)
- *Over the Cracker Barrel* (1976)
- *Light Housework* (1977)
- *Fine Dining* (1978)
- *Early Morning Drizzle* (1979)
- *Pennywhistles & Honeysuckle* (1980)
- *Ladyfinger* (1981)
- *Toilet Tchaikovsky* (with Peter Flute) (1982)
- *Truffles at Dawn* (1983)

- *Jackington Dittie* (1984)
- *Porcelain* (1985)
- *The Schnitzel Affair* (1986)
- *Soap Dish* (1988)
- *Down in the Foyer* (1990)
- *Letters to Eudora* (1993)
- *Corner Street* (1994)
- *Sister Sweetly* (1995)
- *Picturesque* (1997)
- *Farthing* (1998)
- *Return to Maryland* (2001)
- *Eggshells, Brine, and Other Things Swept Aside* (2002)
- *Italique* (2003)
- *Pastels* (2004)
- *Soft-Spoken Steward* (2005)
- *A Lovely Evening—Live* (2006)
- *Withercheek* (2008)
- *Prelude to a New Day* (2009)
- *Tea & Spice* (2011)
- *Moodworks* (2012)
- *Wishing Pond* (2013)
- *Tilting the Kettle: The Very, Very Best of Woodland Knight* (2014)
- *Portobello Locks* (2015)
- *Slow and Steady, with Ugly Betty* (2016)
- *Tiddlywinks & Girlie Drinks* (2017)
- *Stella On the Brain* (2018)
- *The Panini Sessions / Brunch with Delicontessa* (2019)

Eva frowns at the blood trickling from my ears, the snot running from my nose. "Theo, why are you telling me this?"

"I've been listening to Woodland Knight non-stop for the last three days," I say. "Somewhere between *Sister Sweetly* and *Return to Maryland* my brain ran out of memory, and so I was wondering..." I hold up my laptop. "...do you happen to know my password?"

# Bus Stop Simulator

**@theo**

Terry Crews gives me the finger. "Hey, screw you, junior! How was I supposed to know this was going to be a lame server?"

"It's in the server name—'Bus Stop Simulator,'" I reply, exasperated.

"*Goat Simulator* had a similarly-minimalist name, and it was awesome!" Terry glances down the bland, paved-and-lawn-mowed suburb lane that seems to stretch both ways into cloudless blue sky infinity. Then, frowning, he gestures at the industrial-jungle décor of the bus stop. "I mean...the stop's kind of cool. Like, a metaphor for travel or, uh, hope in the midst of despair or something."

"Maybe it's a metaphor for this server sucks."

"Maybe *you* suck."

"And another thing: why are you skinned as Terry Crews?"

"More importantly," Ernie says, intentionally flexing one of Terry's massive arms, "now that virtual skins are the thing, why aren't *you* skinned?"

"I'm comfortable going default," I say.

"I call that bullstank right the hell out. *Nobody's* comfortable in their own skin. Why do you think they invented makeup? Haircuts? Hot wax? Plastic surgery?"

"With or without a skin, I'm still *me*. So, I'll just be my own unique individual self, thank you very much."

"Only reason anyone touts his individuality is because he either can't decide on a skin, or he doesn't want to be ridiculed for his tastes." Ernie studies me thoughtfully. "Is that it? You wish you could wear a giant, orange Trump skin without guff from your friends? You want to be Catwoman and prance around in Spandex, but you're worried people will think you're weird?"

I fold my arms. "I don't need to cope for my own insecurities by hiding behind a skin that's as unsuited to my natural physical traits as possible."

Ernie scowls, looks down the street again. "Something's going to happen. You'll see. This server is *awesome*."

We wait.

A young, attractive, and almost-certainly-skinned yoga babe walks up sporting coffee cup, laptop, casual indifference.

She stands quietly beside us.

Waiting for the bus.

Ernie face-palms himself. "Okay, this is officially lame."

# DSLR

**@ernie**

Random burger joint.

"I bet I can eat this whole thing of hot sauce," I say the moment my rump hits the cheap plastic seat.

"Quit boasting, fatness," Theo says as he slides beside me, sets down his receipt and water cup.

"I'm not *boasting*. I'm stating a fact."

"Factual statements don't start with 'I bet.'"

Bug Eyes and Janny Boy sit across from us, adding their receipts and beverage cups to the collection.

"Show your work," Jan says to me. He holds up the bottle of hot sauce, smiles that sleazy Czech bastard smile of his.

"Ooh, wait." Eva unslings her tiny backpack-purse thingie, pulls out one of those ridiculously large DSLR cameras you see YouTubers and their wannabe followers using all the time. Switching the beast on, she aims it squarely at me. Hits record. "Okay, go."

"What the hell is that?" I demand, pointing at the camera.

"It's a camera."

"I *know* it's a camera. Why are you using it instead of your phone?"

Eva taps the lens with her finger. "Better *bokeh*."

"What the hell is a *bokeh*?"

"The intentional blurriness of a photo's background."

"Why would anyone want a blurry photograph?"

"Aesthetics. I video scrapbook. You know that."

I give Eves the stink-eye. "I've never seen you scrapbook—video or otherwise—in my life."

"That's because you never pay attention to anything that's not sugar-coated or heavily salted. Quit stalling and eat the hot sauce."

"I'm not stalling!" I could totally eat the hot sauce if I wanted to. I could also masturbate right here in front of everybody, and it would totally blow their minds—but just because you *can* do a thing doesn't mean you *have* to. "What, am I a clown to you people? 'Here's a ball—play with it! There's food on the table—eat it!'"

"*You're* the one who brought it up," Theo points out.

"And *you're* the one who ordered a veggie patty at a burger joint!" Is it possible

to overdose on hot sauce? A bead of sweat rolls down my forehead—

"Excuse me?"

We all look up.

This pimply-faced swing manager is standing beside our table. "I'm sorry, children," he says, "but cameras aren't allowed inside the diner."

Jan raises an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"House policy. I'm an amateur photographer myself, so I get it. If it were up to me, I'd let you film to your heart's content. I don't make the rules, unfortunately."

The look on Bug Eyes' face tells me she disagrees with at least two words out of Pimple Face's mouth: "children" and "amateur." In fact, for a sec I'm sure she's going to ask me to hold her rig while she jumps up and puts the guy in some kind of wrestling hold. Instead, she just dimples at him and says, "Sorry. I didn't know." She puts her camera away.

Pimple Face leaves us be.

"What the hell was that all about?" I ask.

"People are skittish around cameras," Eva replies.

Theo nods at the table across the way, where a small gaggle of double-daters are laughing and taking selfies with each other. "They don't look so skittish to me."

"They're using phones, not DSLRs."

"That's senseless," Jan says. "Aren't phone cameras nearly as good as DSLRs these days?"

Eva shrugs. "Specs don't matter. It's psychological. Smartphones are normal, familiar. Everyone's got one. Like, if a stranger is walking through downtown Disney and taking photos on her iPhone, she's just whatever. If that same person is snapping away on a DSLR with a shotgun mic and light attachment, she's clearly up to no good. It doesn't matter that the iPhone girl might be stalking boy buns while the DSLR girl is simply doing street photography for a school project."

Our food arrives, lukewarm and lackluster.

Theo peels the bun off his burger, eyes the veggie patty suspiciously.

"Whatever," I scoff. "Call the pimple dude back here. I'm going to tell him I found a finger in my fries."

"Wait a sec," Eva says, frowning. "A minute ago you were mocking my camera. Now you're standing up for me?"

I blink. "What does your camera have to do with me saying I found a finger in my fries?"

Eva sighs. "Nothing, apparently."

# Newdcoin

**@ernie**

Yes, I'm watching a late-night talk show called *Hard Shaft, with Milton Shaftburger*.

No, I have no idea why.

"*Picture a morning in Huntington Beach, California. In the bedroom of a modest apartment a block away from Main Street, a young woman awakens to the sound of her smartphone alarm. She gets out of bed, does her morning aerobics, showers, eats breakfast—all the ordinary, mundane things one might do when preparing for their day, with one important distinction: she's completely naked.*"

Boobs and crotch pixelated as they may be in the B-roll, it's definitely enough to keep me from changing the channel.

"*The woman's screen name is EmmaZ1998_, and she's a full-time Naker. That is, she goes without clothing all day, everyday in exchange for Newdcoin payments from her followers, who can subscribe to her livestream via the Newdcoin app. The longer she's naked, the more Newdcoin the app mines on her behalf. She also earns bonuses performing commonly requested activities such as showering, exercising, and reacting to Internet memes.*

"*EmmaZ1998_ is one of literally millions of people worldwide who are shucking off their clothing as a means of earning a living. But can a cryptocurrency succeed based solely on the demand for online nudity? With me today is Renevic Shoe, creator of Newdcoin.*"

This gray-haired dude with enormous elementary school teacher glasses appears on-screen, deadpans the camera, clasps his hands.

"*I'm Milton Shaftburger, let's get hard.*"

The camera cuts to a wider shot showing both Milton and Renevic seated at the most retro table you ever saw.

"*It's a pleasure having you in the studio, Renevic.*"

Renevic smooths back his hippie locks, arranges several of his friendship bracelets. "*Please, call me Rene.*"

"*Newdcoin. It says on the official Web site, 'Get naked, earn cash!' Is it really that simple?*"

"*To paraphrase an ancient social media proverb, Milton, everyone winds up naked on the Internet sooner or later. Why not make money at it?*"

"*But a cryptocurrency—nay, an entire decentralized economy—facilitating the exchange of nude selfies and cam videos?*"

"*We have a currency based on exercise—Sweatcoin. There's Cthulhu Offerings, based on ritual sacrifice offered to the mighty Cthulhu. A currency based on nudity is sort of a natural progression.*"

"*Except it's not just nudity, now is it? People are also masturbating and having sex in exchange for money. Some would call that pornography.*"

"*The more explicit the content, the higher the value of the Newdcoin transaction, yes. But this isn't a dating site or hookup app we're talking about here. The sole purpose of Newdcoin is nude performance. Users can't make friends, meet up, or in any way contact Nakers or other users physically. Everything's decentralized.*"

"*It's a small world. Sooner or later a Newdcoin user is bound to bump into someone they've seen or been seen by online.*"

"*The same kind of person who'd stalk someone after having seen them naked online would also stalk them after seeing them fully-clothed on the street. Pervs are pervs. Newdcoin makes no difference either way.*"

"*Give it to me hard, Rene. Are you cashing in on promiscuity?*"

"*Newdcoin merely monetizes—for the users, mind you, and not for me or some corporate conglomerate—the amateur nude and/or sexual content that's already prevalent on the Internet. Content aside, is that anymore ludicrous than your own cryptocurrency, Milton?*"

"*I do have my own currency, Shaftcoin, yes.*" Milton lights a cigar, takes a luxurious puff. "*I've got the what. Now give me the why.*"

"*I made some bad choices during my college days, burned one too many bridges. At age twenty-three, I had no job, no money, no home, no family. But I knew how to code, I knew how to wank, and, like virtually every other human being on the planet, I had a phone. I tried doing live cam shows for a while, but the streaming services all took a cut. It occurred to me that I'm doing all the wanking, I should be keeping all the profit. I don't need a middle man. None of us do. That's where Newdcoin comes in. I'm nothing to look at—but that's the beauty of Newdcoin. If I can do it, anybody can.*"

"*Indeed. An entire generation of young people are making a living with nothing more than a phone and their own bodies, meaning being naked is now their livelihood. What of the danger of success being literally skin-deep?*"

"*Milton, what makes Newdcoin so invaluable is the fact that the people who use it are genuine. Upload, say, to a SuperMegaNet server, and you have no idea who's skinned and who's not. It's superficial, avatars gone wild. With Newdcoin, you're mining nudity or sex using actual, real people, be they gorgeous supermodels or ripped beefcakes, homely housewives or lanky uber-nerds. That's the allure of Newdcoin—the reality. And it's not just the young and attractive who're using the currency. MILFs, DILFs, golden grannies, nasty fatties, flat and featureless, balder than baldies—there's always an audience ready to part with their cash. Basically, if you've got a bod, you can earn Newdcoin.*"

"*You don't find that demeaning?*"

"*Why should I? Why should anyone be shamed into not making a living off his or her body if they want to? The sex is optional. In fact, nearly half of all Newdcoin*

*transactions are for nudity only. Cooking, cleaning, doing yoga or aerobics, hanging a portrait, eating a bran muffin while playing Scrabble—people have all kinds of scenarios they can cash in on that don't involve sex at all."*

"*The potentials are astounding, but so are the pitfalls. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention a recent article in* The Angelican *by Thornton Milburrough in which he states quite bluntly, 'That the world economy of tomorrow will be built upon the bare butts and crotches of young people mining Newdcoin in their bedrooms is a bastardization of blockchain technology that will either bring the cryptocurrency movement to its knees—or usher in a new era of social delinquency the likes of which we've never seen.' Put succinctly, is anyone thinking of the children?"*

"*Oh, we have sophisticated software in place that prevents minors from using Newdcoin..."*

Rene goes on, but I'm not listening. Having disrobed and installed the Newdcoin app on my PC, I aim my webcam at my crotch, snap away, upload the photo (as per the instructions on the account verification page).

The app processes my photo—and returns an error message:

*Pubic hair invalid. Please try again.*

I try again.

*Incorrect genitalia. Please try again.*

WTF?
I try yet again.

*Pubic hair invalid. Please try again.*

And so that's the story of how Gramps walked in on me trying to glue his hairpiece to my crotch.

# Contextual

**@theo**

"I see here," Freud says, shifting in his leather chair, thumbing through my journal, "that you're still doing lists."

"Yeah," I reply.

"What's this one?" He holds the journal out for me to see. "'The Ultimate Contextual Playlist.'"

I blush. "It's...I...sort of...I can usually tell what someone's doing by the song they're listening to. This is a list of all the times I was right."

"An interesting superpower, my boy!" Freud examines the list more closely. "'David Lanz's *Skyline Firedance*?'"

I blush again. "That's my mom working out in her home studio."

"'Ottmar Liebert?'"

"That's Dad cooking."

"'*Symphonecrophilia*, by Asia Afrodesia?'"

"My friend Ernie playing through a *Hella War* campaign."

"'Loud next-door *banda*?'"

"That's Jan working out. He doesn't really listen to his own music."

Freud moves his finger down to the final entry. "And this one here, the one that's crossed off—'The Woodland Knight Discography?'"

I hesitate.

Freud waits.

Face-palm. "That's me listening to so much Woodland Knight that I forget my laptop password."

Checking his wristwatch, Freud nods knowingly, puts my journal down, leans back in his chair, the leather crinkling loudly. "Tell me about your father."

# Unappreciated Loaf

**@eva**

"My thirteenth birthday is going to be *awesome!*" Ernie had proclaimed the week before.

What it's actually like: a placid, almost morose dinner at The Stewed Prune with the Womacks. Ernie, his tuxedoed grandpa, and his cardboard cutout grandma are seated on one side of the table; Theo, Jan, and myself are seated on the other. At the far end of the room, this guy who's even older than Mr. Womack is playing the *Eyes Wide Shut* theme on a grand piano. Various retired couples slurp their food, dab at their mouths, clip their tones.

Ernie's understandably underwhelmed, and is kind of being a meanie about it. I don't know if he invited all 213 of his SuperMegaNet friends and they cancelled on him, or, more likely, if he was never friends with them in the first place, but he's been acting like it's the worst thing in the world to be celebrating his birthday with "*just* us" (his words), *just* the Runt Squad.

We make it through lukewarm soup and a slightly stale salad bar. Then Mr. Womack adjusts Mrs. Womack, pulls out a Nikon Coolpix, and announces that it's time for presents.

Ernie sighs, shoves his bowl out of the way, grumbles, "*Finally*."

First up: a box from Chin & Jowl containing a sweater, corduroy, and a mushy birthday card signed by Mr. and Mrs. Womack.

Ernie moves the box aside, glares at me and the others. "Yours better not be as lame."

I frown and nudge Theo. "You go first."

He grabs his gift bag, slides it across the table.

Mr. Womack aims the Coolpix awkwardly. (Beside him, in her state of living cardboard death, Mrs. Womack leers eerily at Theo as if to say, "Don't I know you from somewhere?")

Reaching into the bag, Ernie fishes out a scented candle. Scrutinizes it.

"Aromatherapy," Theo explains. "You can use it during one of your *Hella War* campaigns. It's good for concentration."

Ernie puts the candle away. "Next."

Jan hands over a scuffed Spendco gift card that he clearly retrieved from a storm drain. "It's got ten dollars on it," he says assuredly.

Ernie stuffs the card into his pocket, makes an unenthusiastic grabbing motion in my direction. "*Next*."

I hand him my gift bag.

He reaches inside, pulls out the most *adorable* plush loaf of bread you ever saw. *Kawaii!*

"What the hell is this?" he asks, bewildered more than upset.

"A plush loaf of bread," I reply with glee.

"I can see that. Why are you giving me a plush loaf of bread?"

"I was at GimmeGimme the other day. I saw it and thought of you."

"Because?"

"Because it's *cute*." I falter. "Because I thought you'd like it."

"Gee. *Thanks*." Ernie replaces the loaf back inside the bag, folds his hands neatly on the tabletop. "Well, unless anyone's got a soap dish or pair of bookends they want to give me, I think we're done here."

An hour and a half later, I'm sitting at the edge of my bed, still dressed from dinner, still stinging from Ernie's reaction to my present. I'd never tell this to your face, Jan, but a gift card you found in the trash? My plush loaf was *way* better than that! And Theo—you clearly let your aromatherapist mom do your shopping for you!

*Le sigh.* I know it's not supposed to be about me. This was a birthday gift for Ernie. He didn't have to like it—but, then, he didn't have to *hate* it, either. The mature thing for me to do would be to shower and call it a night.

Instead, I download into Ernie's bedroom, ready to yell at him, ready to demand that he apologize to Theo, Jan, and myself for being such a—

—*oh*.

Ernie's lying in bed, asleep—

—the plush loaf tucked under one arm.

What a jerk! He'd had me believing he absolutely despised my birthday gift, and here he is, snuggling up with the thing!

One of Ernie's eyes blinks open, rolls around a few times.

Focuses squarely on me.

"You'd better not tell anyone," he mumbles.

I smile. "Your secret's safe with me."

## Ash Drive

**@mini**

The Fry's Electronics in San Angelico is closing. That's why, on an otherwise pleasant Saturday afternoon, we're here touring the empty aisles, perusing the bare shelves. We're paying our respects.

"End of an era," Theo murmurs, wistful.

"End of an era," Eva agrees.

"This was where I got the parts for my custom PC."

"And I bought my first camera here."

They both sigh together.

Jan, having never set foot inside a Fry's, is casually indifferent.

Ernie, however, seems particularly upset. It was actually his idea to come to Fry's in the first place—but not for any reasons you might expect. No, his motivation was more...well, let me put it this way: the shopping cart I'm riding in? It's filled with Noblesse and Desiree.

"Who goes to Fry's for cookies?" I ask, trying to make room for myself in the seat.

"The snacks here," Ernie replies, "are fresher than they are at any given Albertsons, Ralphs, or Stater Bros."

"That can't be true," Theo says.

"Expiration dates don't lie!"

We walk around some more, eventually ending up in the mattress section. Almost instinctually, we sprawl shoulder-to-shoulder on a king-size, stare up at the rafters.

"When you die," Eva says after a moment, "are you going to be buried or cremated?"

"What are *you* going to be?" Theo counters with a nervous laugh.

"I don't know. I guess I'd rather be cremated than buried. It seems less wasteful. I mean, the world is overcrowded enough without the dead taking up space."

"I'm going to be cremated," Jan says. "I don't want to have to worry about ghouls. If you believe in that kind of thing."

"Only you, Brno," Ernie snorts.

"Well?" Eva tilts her head to look Theo in the eye.

Theo faces her, too. "Well what?"

"Burial or cremation?"

Theo looks back up at the rafters, thinks for a sec. "Cremation."

We all look at Ernie now.

"Buried, mofos," he proclaims, and pats his belly. "I want my fat, bloated, stinking corpse to rot in the ground long after I'm dead and gone."

"Why?" Eva asks.

"Because Mother Nature's a bitch. If she wants me back when I die, she's going to have to work for it."

"What about you, Mini?"

"I want a small sampling of my ashes to be sealed inside a USB flash drive," I reply.

"That's...specific," Theo says.

"It's the modern-day version of an urn. The idea is to store video, photos, music, or documents on the drive that loved ones can access in my memory after I'm gone. Pun intended."

"What would your flash drive have on it?"

"Just the movie *Surf Ninjas*." Totally.

"Won't everything be in the cloud by the time you and Theo die?" Jan asks, shifting onto his side, facing us.

"Cloud or not, there'll always be a need for flash drives," Theo answers.

Jan goes supine again and links his hands behind his head. "I bet a group of kids from Sunnyvale said the same thing about Fry's back in 1985."

## HEPAFU

**Chilton Forbes**
@itschiltonheyyy

#AskSummerJackson @summer_girl How do cheerleaders deal with farts?

9:16 AM · Sep 27, 2019 · Twitter Web App

**Summer Jackson**
@summer_girl
Replying to @itschiltonheyyy

HEPA filter underwear. #stupidquestionstupidanswer

9:17 AM · Sep 27, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

## The Funko Pop! Discount Bin

**@theo**

There's a giant bin of discounted Funko Pop! figures at the back of GimmeGimme.

Ernie and I are availing ourselves of it.

Worst Pop! find wins.

"Robo-Trump."

"Too easy. Discard."

"Billy Sherwood."

"Obscure, but too talented. Discard."

"Mr. Richards, from *Mannequin*."

"Ooh. Keep. Bagu?"

"Effing keep." Ernie frowns. "Morgus the Magnificent?"

"Keep."

"Al Stewart."

"Gimme." Exempt so as to be purchased and set beside my Alan Parsons back home.

Ernie snickers, holds up a Goten. "Hey, it's you."

I glower at him.

He drops Goten, sifts on. "You know what I just realized?"

Oh, wow—a Chevy Chase. Keep. "What?"

"You, me, Bug Eyes, and the dirty Czech—we're all only children. One of the Barbarian Brothers."

"For a few more years, yeah. Discard."

"No, Nerdulon-5000. I mean none of us has any siblings. No brothers or sisters. Karnov."

"Oh." Huh. I've never thought about it, but...yeah. We *are* only children. "Keep."

"You ever wonder what it would be like if you had any brothers or sisters? Atticus Murphy, Jr."

I think for a moment. "Discard. I mean, Mini and Beta are kind of like my brothers, I guess."

"A pocket puppet," Ernie says, "and a creepy metrosexual Asian dude living on a server in your bedroom doesn't count. Shaka Brah."

"Keep. I don't know. A little brother or sister following me around everywhere? Tommy Vercetti."

"Discard—too bad-ass. Who says they'd follow you around?"

"You know how little kids are. Don Thorpe—*Baywatch*."

"Keeeeep. That's not necessarily a bad thing. You could pay them slave wages to do your chores for you, and use them as patsies whenever you get in trouble. Old Man Jack."

"Discard. What if we had to share a bedroom, and they wanted to watch TV or listen to music while I was trying to study? Craig Kilborn."

"Keep."

"What if I dropped the baby its first day home from the hospital? Keith, *Stranger Things*."

"Keep. Hedonism Bot."

"Discard—intentionally crappy. What if they get hit by a car while I'm walking them home from school? McShlannigan PI."

"What if you *didn't* turn a simple, harmless hypothetical into a doomsday scenario involving you dropping and/or pushing babies in front of moving cars? Discard." Ernie pauses, smiles, holds up his next find with pride. "The mutant blob version of Chet from *Weird Science*."

I blink, accidental sibling deaths momentarily forgotten. "I believe we have a winner."

"Literally the crappiest Pop! in the bin."

# Crowfood

**@jan**

The leviathan and I are walking home from school when I spot a crow up ahead. It's standing at the edge of the sidewalk, and is trying to peck its way into a package of discarded chicken slices. And even though I know that crows are scavengers, that this is kind of what they *do*, I still think to myself, what's going on in this bird's life that regular grubs or insects aren't enough, that it has to resort to bumming rancid leftovers from the *sidewalk*?

I stop and stare.

Ernie huffs beside me, stoops to catch his breath even though we've been ambling the entire time. "What's...crawled up your...crack?"

"Look at that crow," I say.

"What about it?"

"Makes you think."

"Um...okay."

"I mean, you kind of take it for granted that animals hunt and survive out in the wild without any kind of tools or technology. You see a bird like this, and you don't give a second thought about its livelihood. You assume it's as handy for a bird to forage for food outdoors as it is for a human being to shop at a grocery store. But it's apples and oranges. If I want a slice of chicken, I can just open the package and pop a piece in my mouth—"

"Fuggin' *gross*, dude," Ernie interrupts. "Those cold cuts are at least a couple of days old."

"A crow, on the other hand," I continue, "has to peck and poke and hope a bigger animal doesn't come by before it finally gets the package open." I shake my head. "As bad as things may seem sometimes, I've never had to build shelter in a tree, defend my babies from predators, or peck a mechanically-separated slice of my own species from a plastic package on the sidewalk."

Ernie frowns, scrutinizes the crow. "Don't waste your pity on that winged bastard. He's a creep. All animals are creeps."

I glare at him. "Many people are creeps, too."

"We're better than birds, at least! At *least!*"

"Says who?"

"Says me! I've never pooped on a crow's head and then flown off as if nothing happened! I've never taken a bite out of a dog's leg and then gone blissfully unaware as it rots and falls off from frigging rabies!" Ernie points at the crow.

“Screw the animal kingdom!”

I rub my chin thoughtfully. Sarcastically. “A crow once grabbed a doughnut out of your hand, didn’t it?”

“Shaddup.”

“You were outsmarted by an animal, and now you’re jaded forever because of it.”

“Bite me, big boy.”

# Dwah

**@ernie**

Like, when you're zoned out watching TV at *way* past your bedtime.
And you're dozing wide awake.
With Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer" running through your brain.
And suddenly there's a black screen in front of you.
With just a microphone stand illuminated by a spotlight.
And Fred Armisen walks up to it.
Dressed in a gray suit and white shoes, and with his hair all slicked back.
And he taps the mic, deadpans the camera, and quietly says, "It's actually pronounced *Port-LAN-ja*."

# Brief and Episodic

**@theo**

Freud scrunches around in his giant leather armchair. "How have things been since we last talked?"

"Brief and episodic," I reply.

"Really, now?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Sleeping well?"

"When I can."

"Breaking any hymens?"

*Umkay...* "What?"

Freud chuckles. "Breaking any *hearts*, that is?"

"I don't think so."

"Modest, are we? No matter. 'Brief and episodic.' Tell me about that."

I pretend to look out the window. "Lately I just feel like my life is some kind of random webseries without a complete story arc."

"Interesting. Who says life has to have or be a complete story arc?"

"I don't know. You read a book, and it's got a beginning, a middle, and an end. You play a video game, and it's level up, boss, level up, boss, final boss, game over. You listen to a song, and it's intro, verse, chorus, bridge, solo, outro. You *start* somewhere, you *go* somewhere. When Rush recorded *Vapor Trails*, Alex Lifeson didn't do any guitar solos, and it just became this thing that droned on and on for an hour plus." I sigh. "I guess that's how I feel—like my life has become *Vapor Trails*. No direction, no story arcs. No guitar solos."

"Oh, this mortal coil on which we shuffle," Freud sighs, grinning. "You're thirteen almost, yes?"

Girls—he's going to talk about girls. He *always* talks about girls right after confirming my age. Girls are good. Girls are great. If I get a girl, she'll somehow solve all the world's problems. Girls, girls, girls. "Yeah."

"Thirteen! A handsome little Adam very nearly *bursting* out of his fig leaf that he might capture his own little Eve! How is your Eve, your Eva?"

Called it. "She's fine."

"Fine? Just *fine?* No mutual twitterpation? No head over heels?"

I shake my head, glance at the clock.

"My boy, have you ever considered that maybe it's not life that's become episodic, but, rather, *you?*"

"Um...no."

"All this time you've been pining for your little Eva, and if this *were* a webseries, I'd be twiddling my thumbs and twirling my hair and wondering when in God's name the boy is *finally* going to work up the courage to kiss the girl."

Some kind of latent, manly instinct causes me to retort with, "Oh, we've kissed."

Freud looks pleased. "Have you, now?"

"Well, I was Puck Martin at the time."

"Who's that?"

"The monkey-boy from those old *Puck Martin* movies."

"Ah. Childhood hero?"

Skinning accident. "Not really."

"Tell me about it."

I nibble my lower lip. "It was...great. At first. Here's the thing, though. I finally got up the nerve to kiss my crush, and it wasn't even *me* who kissed her—it was Puck. But then I wonder, if I *hadn't* been wearing his skin, would I have had the courage to do what I did in the first place?"

Freud's smile broadens, and he looks like he's about to have an epiphany—

—when the door to his office flies open.

And in walks this gorgeous brunette who might've otherwise looked stunning in her business-casual number were she not drenched in saltwater and draped with seaweed.

Swiveling around in his chair, Freud exclaims, "Millicent! They told me you were dead!"

"That's what the Atlanteans wanted you to think," Millicent replies.

Freud stares open-mouthed for a moment, then, swiveling back to face me again, clears his throat, clasps his hands. "'Brief and episodic.' Tell me about that."

# Hello Kitties

**@eva**

I drag last night's Halloween clips onto the timeline. There's Jan looking *very* easy on the eyes as a shirtless barbarian dude...wearing sneakers. There's Theo in a toga and carrying a keytar. I'm Wednesday, from *The Addams Family*, though you'll only ever see me in the one or two shots Theo insisted on taking with his phone. Ernie looks like he was in a carpentry accident, his head poking through a piece of roof with a pepperoni pizza resting on one side.

An actual, edible pepperoni pizza.

"Where are all the kids?" Ernie asks, annoyed. He glances down the darkened street.

I follow his gaze, zooming in on the house at the end of the block. It's the only home decorated for Halloween this year; it glimmers faintly, like a dying candle.

"I bet your friend Robbie the Friendly Pervert is asking the same thing right about now," Jan laughs.

Ernie pays Jan's loincloth a critical glance. "Looks like you couldn't afford to buy a costume, and so you wore your street clothes, huh?"

"Yes, the family loincloth was all I could afford this year."

"*Ew*. I hope you washed it down by the river before you put it on."

"That was a joke, leviathan."

"*Sure* it was—"

Fast-forward.

Close-up on Theo in know-it-all mode as we make our way down the street: "—everyone's on the Halloween servers. I mean, why prance around actual in a cheap, plastic costume when you can go virtual and install a custom skin?"

Fast-forward again.

Summer's just downloaded beside us, and Ernie's giving her a hard time over her leotard and skirt combo.

"What are *you* supposed to be?" he asks. It should be noted that there's a slice of pizza missing from his rooftop.

"Cheerleader—he*llo*," Summer replies.

"You can't just leave on your workout gear after practice and call it a costume!"

Summer scowls. "*Umkay*, what's the definition of a superhero? Spandex..." She pinches her leotard. "...and superpowers." She hands her loot bag to Theo, turns a perfect cartwheel, reclaims her loot bag. Shakes her pom-poms.

"Girlfriend," Ernie says, "I don't know what you think superheroes are, but—"

Fast-forward yet again.

We're now standing in front of the Halloween house. Ernie's jabbing his finger angrily at Summer (there's another slice missing from his pizza). "—and I say *my* costume will get more candy than your sleazy cheer clothes!"

"You're on!" Summer retorts.

(Off-camera, Theo can be heard murmuring, "Dude, stop eating your costume.")

We cross the front yard, cram ourselves onto the step. Ring the doorbell.

This old white couple answers. They look just like Nan and Byron from that "American Gothic" painting portrait thingie. I'm not sure if it's for Halloween, or if this is how they always look. They've got a plastic pumpkin filled to the top with unclaimed candy bars.

"Trick or treat!" Theo, Jan, Summer, and myself shout in unison.

Contrasted with Ernie's, "Halloween, biatches!"

"Oh, my!" gasps Nan. She smiles at Theo. "Who are you?"

"Young Evángelos Papathanassíou, from *Ongaku Taisen*," he replies proudly.

Nan drops a single candy bar into his bag.

"And you?" Byron asks, appraising Jan's sneakers.

"John Carter of Mars," Jan replies.

"*That's* who you're undressed as?" Ernie snorts.

Single candy bar.

Nan faces Ernie. Frowns. "And you, hon?"

"Duh," Ernie replies. "*Breaking Bad*. The roof with a pizza on it. Season three, episode two."

Single candy bar.

"And you, my darling?"

Summer dimples, thrusts her loot bag at Theo again, and does an impressive back handspring.

"Oh, Byron, look at that!" exclaims Nan. "Such poise! Such grace! Sweets for the sweetie!"

*Three* candy bars.

Fast-forward.

Shaky medium shot of Ernie waving Theo's keytar menacingly at Nan and Byron. "Just give me the candy, lady, and maybe I'll let you keep your wrinkled old soul!"

Stop.

Select all.

Delete.

Rest head on desk and sigh.

# Epilogue of a Sleepover

**@mike**

Midnight.

A bedroom laid waste.

Bodies strewn everywhere.

Empty plates smeared with junk food residue.

Socks balled up in corners, strewn over backs of chairs.

At this point there's not even air in the room anymore—it's just heavy breath and recirculated farts.

This is the epilogue of Theo's first sleepover, and I have to say, mess aside, it's nice to see the kiddo loosening up with his friends for once. It's not like him at all, and I'm both proud and...what's the proper word for when you suddenly realize your little boy is turning thirteen and socializing and diving head-first into adolescence? Nauseous?

I navigate past Ernest, who's snoring loudly and spooning a bag of Chips Ahoy! on the floor. Past Jan, half into and half out of a threadbare sleeping bag. I glimpse Theo, passed out on his bed with that plush doll of his cradled in his arms, a literal plume of *z's* escaping his nostrils.

Nope, not like him at all.

Smiling, I turn off the TV and grab the rest of the hummus. I pick up a few other food items, too—just the stuff that'll go bad if left out overnight. Then I retreat back into the hallway, closing the bedroom door behind me, inhaling fresh air—

—and running into...Theo?

He waves at me in the semi-darkness. "Hey, Dad."

"Uh...hey. Where were you just now?"

"Couldn't sleep, so I went down to the kitchen to make some tea." He holds up a mug of what smells like chamomile.

I glance at the bedroom door. "Wait—if you're out here, then who's in there?"

## Blinking Light, Blinking Light

**@jan**

Once upon a time, the Internet must've been something to behold. Now it's just...the Internet. As such, we're bored and looking for something to do. That's why we're sprawled on Theo's bedroom floor with our phones. Well, Theo, Eva, and me, we have our phones. Ernie's got a bag of Cheetos. He's also got a posture that's one-hundred-percent beached whale.

"There's a new *Star Trek: The Next Generation* server online," Theo suggests. "We can play the *Poker in Data's Quarters* mini-game."

"Meh," Ernie replies.

"Ooh," Eva says. "Justin Lukach and Yoshi the Dolphin are doing a *Departures* anniversary Q&A. We could go to that."

"*Meh.*"

I nod at Theo's Switch. "Maybe there's a new *Mario Kart* DLC?"

"*Mehhh.*"

Theo puts his phone down, glares at Ernie. "Well, what do *you* want to do, then?"

"Anything but this!"

Eva sighs. "Um, here's a thought. Why don't we go for a walk?"

"There's a server for that?"

"I meant in the outdoors, Ernie."

"Where would we walk?" I ask.

A trio of asterisks breezes past my head. Suddenly it's ten minutes later, and we're sneakered and strolling through Theo's neighborhood. Down Almond, to be exact.

"Oh, *this* is fun," Ernie jeers sarcastically, inhaling a mouthful of Cheeto (he's brought the bag with him). There are crows circling above his head; one of them swoops in and tries to grab a morsel from him. He swats at it, screams, "Beat it, wing-slut!"

Expletives aside, it's kind of nice to be outside. Like *Bus Stop Simulator*, only actual.

We make our way down the street with Theo's phone scoring our steps. He's got on "walking music"—something by David Arkenstone, I think. We're waiting for the light to change at a random cross-street when we notice the box. It's half hidden between the sidewalk and a row of bushes flanking the house to our right. It looks like some kind of junction box, with a blinking red light on top and a

gigantic warning sign that reads, "If this light is blinking, contact the CDC immediately." Followed by an eight-hundred number.

Ernie reads the sign, then takes a step back from the box. "What the hell does that mean?"

"'Center for Disease Control,'" Theo answers. "That's what CDC stands for."

"I *know* what CDC stands for. What the heck does it have to do with this box?"

I shrug. "Should we call the number?"

Theo looks concerned. "What if it's some kind of prank?"

Ernie looks more concerned. "What if it's *not* a prank, and by *not* calling, we're unleashing a new strain of butt-thrax upon the world?"

"Butt-thrax, not a thing," Eva says, frowning. "And anyway, why would *this* box in *this* suburb have *anything* to do with a biological outbreak?"

"Flu season doesn't just *happen!* It has to come from *somewhere!* Maybe this is how these things get started—ground zero! Virus in the wild! Zombie apocalypse!" Ernie goes wide-eyed, cups his Cheeto-encrusted hands over his mouth. "OMFG, guys—what if calling the number for *this* box saves Theo's neighborhood, but simultaneously triggers *another* box in some random neighborhood we don't know to release a butt-thrax mushroom cloud that zombifies everyone within a mile radius?"

We all look at each other.

And then back at the utility box.

With its blinking red light.

## Future Prophecy

**@ernie**

While waiting for YouTube ad 1 of 3 to finish playing so that I can get the heck back to watching the actual video I came here for, it occurs to me that if—many years from now, mind you—me and the gang spawn children of our own, and if those children happen to be best friends, this is the kind of fluff you're going to overhear them talking about:

"Hey, Theodora."

"Hey, Ernestina. What's up?"

"The Kounicova octuplets have a couple hours to kill while their trailer gets fumigated for silversharks. They hit me up for a round of *Möbius Strip Poker*, but my strip's broken. Can we download to your place instead?"

"Yeah, but we'll have to wait until the living room's free."

"Why? What the hell's going on in your living room?"

"My parents are watching YouTube."

"What's YouTube?"

"It's where old people go to watch advertisements on the Internet."

"What's the Internet?"

"It's where old people swapped data before the singularity."

# Skintillated

**@theo**

I'm standing in line outside GimmeGimme (they're giving away one-thousand free mystery boxes for Black Friday) when a SuperMegaNet notification pops up on my phone:

Update complete.

I go to swipe the notification away—and that's when I notice that suddenly I'm a monkey-boy and in black and white. Again.

Okay. Stay calm, Theo. So what if you're in a busy mall and it's Black Friday and people are looking at you like you're, well, Puck Martin back from the dead and standing in a busy mall on Black Friday? This kind of thing could happen to anyone. I'm sure I'm not the first...am I?

I'm getting mad instincts to swipe myself home. I grip my phone tightly in my hand; my thumb hovers over the "Send Home" button. But I hesitate. Scrunch my eyes shut. Muster my every ounce of CBT, mindfulness, and plain old-fashioned stubbornness—kind of like when I'm using a public urinal, and I'm just about to start peeing, and someone walks in to use the urinal beside me, and suddenly I'm stuck in public restroom purgatory, too embarrassed to pee, too embarrassed *not* to pee, and so I just stand there hanging dong with my eyes scrunched shut praying for the guy next to me to hurry up and finish so that *I* can hurry up and finish—

—I can do this. I *am* doing this.

I came here for the glory.

I shall have it.

Making my public restroom purgatory squinty face, I ignore the stares, pretend I can't hear the snide comments or feel the open air on my nether regions as I hunch over my phone, trying to figure out why an SMN update would cause me to revert to undead monkey-boy form.

"Your cosplay is *so* retro," says this tween-ish girl who's got her phone aimed at me. "Can I get a pic?"

I lift my head, frowning awkwardly and trying to decide the best way to politely decline. "Uh—"

She takes a pic and recedes into the teeming masses.

I lower my head again. I know Taurus Labs rolled out the virtual skins feature earlier this year. But I'm not virtual at the moment—unless they're finally rolling

out the persistent skinning feature?

"Son, you look awfully pale," comments some older guy in a cowboy hat whom I'm almost certain is a Texas oil tycoon. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I reply.

He nods, takes a selfie with me, and is on his way.

Back to my phone, I pull up Taurus Labs' Web site and do a search. The part on skinning is as outdated and unhelpful as it's ever been:

> Skins are a beta feature of SuperMegaNet. Using the Skins add-on, you can alter your digitized appearance, including hair style, eye and skin color, height, weight, build, and more. Currently, this only works in video chat, but with version 1.0 you can expect skins to function throughout your SMN experience. Finally, you can be who you always wanted to be!

"Hey, monkey-boy!"

The crowd belches out this lanky twenty-something dude in a vest, skinny jeans, and trucker hat combo. "The 1940s just called—they want their celluloid back!"

"Yeah, nice crotch-rag!" jeers the dude's crappy sidekick. In epic eighties glam metal vibrato: "*Fah-lay-ming!*"

I raise a single eyebrow. "Don't you two have anything better to do than pick on someone half your age?"

Trucker Hat shrugs. "I'm a grad student."

His sidekick as well. "My girlfriend dumped me."

They take turns snapping selfies, are on their way.

The line advances another step.

Someone on Twitter has this to say about today's SuperMegaNet upgrade:

**J.K. Elsemi**
@asdfjklsemi2005

Is anyone else persistently skinned right now? Just went all Mandalorian at Grandma's pot luck thanks to the new #SuperMegaNet update. #techfail #wtf

12:31 PM · Nov 29, 2019 · Twitter for Android

Okay. So, it's not just me.

The line continues to advance at a glacial pace. I pass the time reading SMN-related tweets and dimpling on autopilot for idiot consumers who think I'm some kind of cosplay novelty. At long last, I reach the front of the line, where (oh, my *God*) Robbie the Friendly Pervert, apparently a GimmeGimme employee, smiles ear to ear and hands me my mystery box.

"Hey there, handsome," he says, and reaches out to tousle my hair. "Do you like plantains?"

Luckily, the kid behind me shoves me out of the way and demands at the top of his lungs to get what's coming to him.

I don't hang around for the police report. I got what I came for, and now I'm quickly scurrying along the edge of the crowd and back out into the mall proper, momentarily oblivious to being monkeyed and in black and white and the subject of toy store creeper lust. I got my mystery box! There could be *anything* inside! A pixel art T-shirt! A sonic screwdriver USB charger! Funko Pop! vinyls! A cream-colored coffee cup!

Standing beside the Cinnabon next door, I rip open my box. Pause. Frown. There's no shirt. Nor vinyls. Nor sonic screwdriver USB charger. Definitely no cream-colored coffee cup. There's just a little trophy sporting a proud-bottomed Puck posing with his hands on his hips. The plaque beneath reads, "Best Tail Award."

I glance over my shoulder.

From the GimmeGimme entrance, Robbie waves and blows me a kiss.

This is the blackest Friday ever.

# Forced Update

**@eva**

"Wait—so, how did you do this to yourself again?" Ernie asks, poking at Theo's monochrome monkey-boy shoulder. They're sitting together at the edge of Theo's bed. Well, Theo's sitting. Ernie's sprawled in a kind of sideways shrug that's allowed the bottom of his belly to peek out from underneath his sweater.

"I didn't *do* anything," Theo replies, and slaps Ernie's hand away. "I was standing in line at GimmeGimme, and this notification pops up on my phone. The next thing I know, I'm Puck Martin."

Picking up Theo's tail trophy, Ernie leans back on the bed, scrutinizes the trophy shrewdly. "Mm-hm. And you won Best Tail because...?"

"*Ugh*," I say, scowling at him. "You're absolutely no help." To Theo: "Why don't you coax the genie out of the bottle and figure us up some answers?"

"Genie?" Theo asks.

I point at Beta's collection of hard drives. "The talented Mr. Wong."

"Oh. He wasn't on his server, so I left him a text." Theo gets up, goes over to the mirror. Frowns at his reflection. "Is this going to happen to me every time SuperMegaNet updates?" He runs a hand through his impeccably coiffed hair. "I look *so* fourth grade."

"To be fair," Ernie chimes in, "you look fourth grade even when you're not skinned."

"Bite me."

"When and where, Best Tail."

I sigh. "Can you turn off automatic updates until Taurus maybe works things out?"

"You can't disable automatic updates," Theo replies, examining his toy dagger.

Ernie looks surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. That's very Microsoft."

"Forced updates that haven't been fully tested prior to release?" I chuckle. "*Totally* MS."

"Freaking Mac users," Ernie hisses at me under his breath.

Re-sheathing his dagger, Theo sits back down, using one hand to check his phone, his other to keep Ernie from flicking his nipple. "It's not just me. There are a *bunch* of people tweeting about the same thing happening to them."

"They're all being persistently skinned as Puck Martin?" Ernie asks.

"No, fat stuff. Their most recently installed skins are going persistent."

"Wait, wait." Ernie struggles back into his sideways sitting position. "Wait." He looks thoughtful. "Are you sure it's not just Donald Trump having some fun?"

Theo and I exchange glances.

"You said Twitter...? The wonky stepchild of social media...? You know... because it's a Facebook world...? Because only the Trump uses Twitter anymore...?" Ernie looks annoyed. "Eff you. The joke was apt." He flicks us off. "In other news, has anyone considered paying a visit to the SMN help desk? Hm?"

Theo looks at Ernie, at me.

Lifts his phone and swipes us forth.

And this is the SuperMegaNet help desk server: a gigantic, pale-walled room easily the size of the Chick-fil-A Convention Center downtown and packed to capacity with users who've been persistently skinned against their will. It looks like a cosplay convention. Ever see the queue toward the end of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? That's no match for the line we step into now.

A blob of vaguely-familiar pixels standing in front of us turns around and waves. "*Můj bože!* You too?"

It's Jan, in pixel monster form.

Theo deadpans a nonexistent camera. "See, this is why forced updates suck."

## Your Mudbrick Creative Suite Is Out-of-Date

**@theo**

I'm fidgeting. Shifting from one foot to another. Picking absent-mindedly at the sheath strapped to my monkey thigh. I glance around at all the celebrities, athletes, and superheroes waiting in line, and I wonder, how can people do this? How can people stand in lines and wait and wait and wait some more—how does the world spin on in such a manner?

"What's the matter?" Jan asks, his voice sounding all 32kbps MP3.

"This is definitely the worst line I've ever had to stand in," I reply.

"Worse than the lines at Spendco?" Ernie asks.

"Worse."

"Worse than Macro Central on Black Friday?"

I think for a moment. "Close."

Eva glares at me. "You could swipe out and just stay jungle-skinned for the rest of your life. Anything's better than waiting in line for any amount of time, right?"

"Sarcasm?" I ask with a frown.

"Sarcasm."

I face forward again.

The line moves on. Amazingly, Ernie sticks with us all the way to the front despite frequent complaints that today's social media generation is too hung up on skins that prioritize sex over substance. I start to point out his recent, rampant overuse of Drax the Destroyer, but Eva cuts me off each time with a well-practiced look of, "Don't make a crappy situation crappier by lighting a fire under fat boy's ego."

Taurus' tech support team is stationed at two-dozen windows set along a bland, high-lipped counter. My guess is that they're saving bandwidth by keeping things plain and simple—kind of like how those original *Star Trek* sets were so vanilla due to budgets being nearly non-existent. Jan goes off ahead of us, his pixelation eliciting a brief scream of terror from the support rep assigned to him. When it's my turn, I walk up to the appropriate window, standing on my toes so that I can rest my elbows on the countertop. The combination of the high counter and Cameron Beaumont's short stature is almost comical.

My bored-looking tech rep nods and says, "Hi, my name is Marta. How may I help you today?"

Isn't it obvious from the fact that I'm a *Puck Martin* character and in black and white? "I'm persistently skinned," I reply.

"Did you receive SuperMegaNet update 0.97.121.168?"

"Um...I think so?"

The tech rep nods again, does something on her laptop. "It looks like you installed the update earlier today."

"It installed itself, actually."

Eva nudges me in the ribs, shoots me a heavy-lidded stare. "He digresses."

Unamused, the tech rep continues to do things on her laptop. "It looks like you have the SuperMegaNet desktop client installed, correct?"

"Yes."

"Is your system up to date?"

"Yeah, but the glitch occurred while I was using my phone, not my PC—"

"Hm." There's noticeable brow-furrowing crinkling the tech rep's forehead. "According to your system's anonymous telemetry data, there's a new update for Mudbrick Gymnast available."

I do a little brow-furrowing of my own. "What would viewing and editing PDF files have to do with me being skinned persistently?"

The tech rep shrugs. "It might have nothing to do with it, it might have *everything* to do with it." She checks her laptop once more. "Hm. Several of your Mudbrick Creative Suite cloud apps are out-of-date. Mudbrick Gymnast is at version 19.021.20058a. The current version is 19.021.20058b. Additionally, you're using Mudbrick Selfie 21.0.1. The current version is 21.0.2. Layout 14.14159, Reveal 13.333, Cafe 19.0.1.11212.RC5, Arouse 16.0.1.45, and Doodle 23.98—all out-of-date. Have you been paying your subscription fees on time?"

"Uh, yeah, but—"

"Okay, what I need you to do is go ahead and update your Mudbrick software before we proceed."

I blink. "So, I have to download back home, update, re-upload, and stand in line all over again?"

The tech rep waves her hand dismissively. "We can do a VPN from here." She swivels her laptop around, yawns, looks at the ceiling. "Please enter your PC's username and password. All connections are secured with the latest WEP technology. Taurus Labs is in no way liable for any damages or losses...resulting from...yada-yada." Yawn.

I'm not going to lie, I am *not* okay with handing over my PC credentials to Taurus or anyone else. But the thought of having to wait in line all over again is just...*no*. So, here's the brilliant plan my brain concocts on my behalf: hand over my password now, immediately change it when I get back home.

I sign in. My desktop, with its epic Roger Dean background, slides into view. I open Mudbrick Manager; a dialog box pops up:

> Thank you for subscribing to Mudbrick Creative Suite. Please help us improve Mudbrick Gymnast by answering the following mandatory questions.

Followed by twenty questions asking me about usage statistics, whether or not

I'd recommend Mudbrick Systems' software to friends and family in a variety of unlikely scenarios, and information regarding my...sexual preferences?

I don't even start the questionnaire before swiping the dialog out of the way and raising my hand. "Miss?"

"Yes?" the tech rep asks, setting down her nail file.

"Why am I paying for Mudbrick's marketing research?"

Another yawn. "If you like, I can transfer you to Mudbrick's customer support department." She reaches for her laptop—

I slam my hand on the countertop. "*Don't you dare!*"

Something's brushing against my backside.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spot Ernie trying to peek under my loincloth. "What are you doing?" I yelp.

"Checking for hefty pairs in bloom," he replies.

## ’Tis the Season to Be Effing Off

**@mini**

Theo downloads back into his bedroom. Judging by the fact that he’s still a monkey-boy and still in black and white, I’m guessing his visit to Taurus tech support didn’t solve anything.

Nevertheless, I ask, “How’d it go?”

He unstraps the toy dagger from his hip, lets it drop onto the floor as he throws himself face-down onto his bed. “I’m sleeping until 2020.”

I climb up beside him, tuck myself into his arms.

“Suffer the holidays,” I whisper.

“Suffer the holidays,” he whispers back.

## My Own Personal Help File

**@theo**

A long, long nap later, Beta downloads into my room to find me curled up in bed with Mini clasped in my arms.

"Got your text, little dude," he says, waving his hand in front of my monochrome face. "What's up?"

I roll onto my side and lick my lips, brush a stray lock of hair from my eyes. Mini tumbles onto the floor, where Jan, still pixelated, is sprawled out with my Switch. "Persistently skinned," I reply.

Beta regards both of us curiously. "Huh."

"Taurus tech support was no help," Jan explains. "We waited in line for hours only to have them VIP—"

"VPN," I correct.

"—into Theo's computer and tell him they couldn't find anything wrong besides some of his Adobe Acrobat—"

"Mudbrick Gymnast."

"—software being outdated. Me, they just said they'd open a support ticket and get back to me in twenty-four hours."

"According to the Internet, that's what Taurus is telling all SuperMegaNet users. Those affected by the upgrade bug, anyway."

Beta scratches his chin. "Geez. I picked the wrong time to defrag myself."

"FAT32 much?" Mini asks.

"Figure of speech. What were you doing visiting your counselor's *Puck Martin* server again?"

"I wasn't anywhere near her server." Getting out of bed, I shift over to the closet and don a T-shirt and some joggers. Then I sit at my desk. "I was standing in line at GimmeGimme."

"Hm. Does that trophy say 'Best Tail?'"

I click an imaginary menu above my head. "Alt-H, please."

"What, am I your own personal help file or something?" Beta smirks, thinks for a moment. "I take it you were using the mobile app when things went south?"

I nod. "Mobile app."

"Mobile app," Jan adds.

"Let's have a look, little dudes."

We hand over our phones.

Beta then snaps his finger John de Lancie style and disappears—uploaded to his

personal server, I'm guessing. Or possibly the Continuum.

"Wow," Jan says, impressed. "Since when did he start uploading like *that*?"

"Not sure," I reply.

"Kind of cool. Like Queue from *Star Trek*."

"'Q?'"

"Yeah. You know, Queue."

I narrow my eyes. "Wait, are you saying 'Q' or 'Queue?'"

"Yeah."

Urge to grammar and usage rising—

Beta downloads into my bedroom once again, hands me my phone, Jan's his as well. "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

Jan and I reply over each other:

"Good."

"Bad."

Mini frowns at him. "Why would you ever want the bad news first?"

"So that anything that follows will be a little better by comparison."

Which makes sense. Still, I'd prefer to be armed with at least a wooden sword before charging into battle, so to speak. "The good news first, please, Beta."

(Jan rolls his eyes at me—his version of silent protest.)

"Okay," Beta says, "the good news is that I'm pretty sure I know what the problem is and how to fix it. Bad symlink. Basically there are global skin directories and user skin directories. Some moron swapped the two during the latest SuperMegaNet upgrade. The app keeps a backup of all skins installed. For you, Theo, the Puck Martin one got incorrectly installed globally, and so it became your default user skin during the upgrade. Jan, your custom user skin got overridden by your actual bytes. Either way, it's an easy fix."

"What's the bad news?" Jan asks.

"The bad news, uh..." Beta sighs. "I kind of don't have the proper permissions to make the changes on the Taurus server."

I swallow hard. "You're locked out?"

"Admin passwords are changed. Code is updated. Security vulnerabilities are squashed. Since leaving Taurus, it was always going to be a matter of time before I got locked out completely."

"So, we're persistently skinned from here on out?"

Beta blinks. "What? Hell no." He reaches out, ruffles my hair. "No worries. It's just shoddy programming. I may need a while is all."

**@beta**

That's what I'm telling the little dude.

And I'm ninety-nine-percent sure it's the truth.

But nobody—not even Taurus—is incompetent enough to be foiled by a bogus symlink. Even if they *had* been, they would've fixed it by now. No, if I didn't know

any better, I'd say that the persistent skinning thing was done on purpose.

If I didn't know any better.

## Happeh New Year

**evil_ernie:** Hey, crotch-rag.
**l33t_master:** Huh?
**evil_ernie:** 8===D~~ ~ ~
**evil_ernie:** That's a spurting ASCII dong.
**l33t_master:** I can see that.
**evil_ernie:** New Year's resolution achieved.
**l33t_master:** This is Mini, by the way.
**l33t_master:** Theo's busy moping with his Best Tail award.
**evil_ernie:** Go get him.
**l33t_master:** Why?
**evil_ernie:** 8===D~~ ~ ~

## Suddenly You Were Gone

**@theo**

Beta downloads into my bedroom.

With a Bluetooth speaker in hand and a silent understanding.

He solemnly sets the speaker on my dresser, joins me and Mini sitting at the edge of my bed.

"What song?" Mini asks softly as I pair my phone.

"It's got to be '2112,' little dude," suggests Beta.

"Or 'The Spirit of Radio.'"

"'Tom Sawyer.'"

"Dude, 'Xanadu.' Play 'Xanadu.'"

"'Limelight.'"

"What do you think, Theo?"

I scroll through the playlist on my phone. Stop. Tap a track that I haven't heard in ages. It's not a particularly well-known or dexterous Rush song—but, then, it doesn't need to be.

"Bravado" starts playing.

And for the next four-and-a-half minutes, Neil is with us again.

*RIP, Neil Peart*
*1952 – 2020*

## Meeting Shaka Brah

**@theo**

"Internet Explorer or Firefox?" Cheetos Dude asks upon my uploading onto the Semantic Web server.

"Lynx," I say for something new.

"Oh, hell *yeah*." He steps aside, letting me pass without so much as a second glance at my erroneous monkey-boy skin.

I find an empty seat at one of the Web's trademark wooden spool tables and sit, unsling my messenger bag. I'm not really one of those freelancers who has to work at a cafe in order to be productive; I just want to keep out of Mom and Dad's way until Beta (or Taurus) can figure out how to uninstall Puck Martin. I figure a place like this, where everyone's skinned 24/7, is a more conducive way to spend my time versus pacing around my bedroom waiting for the proverbial kettle to boil. I'm relieved to see there's a Ben 10 a couple of tables over, an Eric Cartman playing Jenga with some pals in the sofa pit. In other words, I'm not the only creep wearing a kiddie-skin.

I set up my laptop, start working on some new code for Asia Afrodesia's Web site. It's slow going, though. Every time I glance down at the keyboard for whatever reason, I spot my junior-sized arms and hands, and I pause, wondering. Doubting. Beta can fix this. Beta can fix anything...right?

"Interesting take on the boho subculture," comes a voice from beside me.

I look up to find a headbanded, well-built surfer bruh with long, wavy hair standing at my table. In his late teens, he's dressed plainly in colorful board shorts, and is adorned with a multitude of handmade necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. Laptop in one hand, matcha latte in the other. Friendly smile.

"Sorry?" I mumble.

"Newcomer in the house," the surfer bruh says. "I didn't realize there were boho fans here." He scrutinizes my skin. "Hollywood Golden Age, right? Curious George? Or a more modern throwback—Guenter from *Futurama*?"

I squirm in my seat. "Puck Martin. He was some kind of monkey-boy orphan adopted by John and Jane Martin in those old *Puck Martin* movies."

The surfer bruh nods, carefully thumps his laptop against his chest. "Shaka Brah, as played by Blaze Masterson in the nineties sitcom *Shaka Brah!*"

"Oh."

"Mind if I join you?"

On the one hand, I'm thinking having another shirtless dude around might

lessen the novelty of my own skin. On the other hand, multiple shirtless dudes banding together might create some new kind of novelty in and of itself. After debating the pros and cons for considerable milliseconds, I nod and say, "Sure."

Shaka takes a seat next to me, sets his things down. "How'd you get into boho culture?"

"What now?"

"Boho. You know, the minimalist solarpunk culture and fashion trend currently sweeping Japan?"

Japan—of course. "Oh. It's not—this isn't really my thing."

Shaka looks mildly perplexed. "It's not?"

I explain about Thrill-Kill's *Puck Martin* server mishap (omitting the parts about Bloodcoin and the demogorgonzola), and how the latest SuperMegaNet upgrade seems to have stuck me with a rerun.

"Yikes," Shaka says once I've finished. "That's definitely not the ideal introduction to boho."

"Tell me about it."

"It's not a bad skin, though. The black and white is a nice throwback to simpler times. Days of yore. The classics. You really don't find boho the least bit liberating? Freeing?"

If anything, it's *too* freeing. This may not be *my* bare skin, but bare skin is still bare skin. I'm the self-conscious type; I do *not* need to be showing off the goods. I do *not* need curious glances and pointed fingers. I do *not* need Ernie constantly swiping at and commenting on my nipples. "This isn't my skin. This isn't who I am. I'm just killing time until Taurus releases a patch."

Shaka smiles, gazes off into the distance. "I hear you. I remember when I was younger. I couldn't get away from seventeen fast enough. Now I revel in seventeen. It's not something that can be explained. You have to experience it for yourself in due time."

Wait a sec—how old is Shaka Brah? Or, rather, how old is the SMN user wearing his skin? He doesn't sound like a kid. If he were, he'd agree with me: being underage sucks. Homework, chores, rules, curfew, kids' meals, constantly-outgrown clothes, schoolyard bullies, stranger danger, parents monitoring your every move—who in their right mind would *want* to exist perennially as anything younger than twenty-one?

I smile and shrug, pretend to be extra busy on my laptop.

Shaka takes the hint, and is quiet for all of thirty seconds. Then, leaning in close, eyes fixed on my laptop screen, he says, "Hey, that's Asia Afrodesia's Web site, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah," I reply, resisting the urge to cringe.

"You're her webmaster?"

"I am."

"That's awesome! I *love* Asia Afrodesia, never make a playlist without 'Fool Me Once, Bang Me Twice,' 'A Feast Between My Legs,' and 'Sextual Healing' on it. How'd you get a gig like that?"

"Asia's management found my listing on Fancy Peanuts and asked me to re-do her Web site. I've never met her in person or anything, though."

"Still, you must have stories."

"Not really." I hunch over my laptop, trying to look even busier.

Shaka studies me wistfully. "This really bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Huh?"

"Being persistently skinned like this."

"Oh. It's...inconvenient, I guess."

"Nah-ah, Puck. You're stiffer than Dana Andrews' acting in *Laura*."

I sigh, lean back. "If you must know, I'm small in real life. Shorter than everyone else. People always think I'm younger than I actually am. I have a hard enough time with that, let alone being even smaller. And younger. And less dressed. And a monkey-boy. I just...want to deal with being me again. I can handle that."

Shaka looks off into the distance again. Considers something. "What if I told you I could help you with your skin problem?" Straightening, he opens his laptop, works on it for a minute or two, then swivels it around so that I can see the screen —

—which shows my SuperMegaNet account.

My *private* SuperMegaNet account.

I face Shaka full. "How...?"

"Let's just say I have an insight, Theo Ivanovich. Aka, l33t_master. Interested?"

You bet I'm interested—and terrified. Mostly terrified. But also interested. I mean, I kind of have to know how Shaka Brah hacked right into my account as easily as if he were logging into Gmail. But some random dude who's into boho culture could also be into a whole lot more and a whole lot worse. No good can come of this. Can it? No, of course not. Unless—

—*No.*

I'm going to politely decline. I'm going to download back home and huddle in bed and forget I ever came to the Semantic Web. I'll be patient, wait out Beta or Taurus or both. I reach up to close my laptop...and I catch Puck's reflection blinking back at me in the gloss of the screen, and it's like, *ugh*. I don't want to be this kid anymore or ever again. I want to be *me*. If Shaka Brah can make it happen...well, Cheetos Dude vets everyone who uploads here, right?

I close my laptop and quietly say, "Okay. I'm interested."

Shaka smiles, brings up a SuperMegaNet window on his laptop.

Sends us away.

## Bitcoin or Baby?

**@theo**

Wait, why am I standing in a low-ceilinged, rocky hallway with shiny blue bubble-like doors at either end—

—OMFG.

I'm in one of the Brinstar bridge corridors from the original *Metroid*.

A few things of note: the stone walkway is uncomfortably warm beneath my bare feet (I'm still skinned as Puck Martin, which means I've arrived on alien-infested Zebes underdressed and armed with only a toy knife). Toward one end of the corridor, there's a stack of maybe twenty or so Bitcoins taped to a Roomba that's about to drive over the edge of the bridge; toward the other, an oblivious, teetering infant also about to go over the edge. This is alarming to no end one, because *friggin' bridge*. Two, because beneath us is what looks like either lava, acid, or both, and I haven't played *Metroid* recently enough to remember whether we're above the pit that leads to the Ice Beam—or that infamous dead end at the bottom of a multi-screen free-fall.

Shaka Brah is, of course, nowhere to be found.

I glance quickly at the Bitcoins.

At the baby.

Bitcoins.

Baby.

Bitcoins—

My legs kick into high gear, and I dash over to the baby, which has one foot extended beyond the walkway's edge. Scooping the tyke up into my arms, I turn around again just in time to witness the Roomba hurtling to its demise, Bitcoins and all.

The urge to drop to my knees and cry is strong—but just then the bubble-door in front of me ripples open, and Shaka Brah's voice sounds over an invisible intercom: "Pass. You may now enter Moyo."

# Litterkimmy

**@whom**

There are 40,000,000 people
in Litterkimmy.

These are their problems.

—

A pixel monster, a bug-eyed jockette, and a talking plush doll are sitting over there at that doughnut shop shaped like a gingerbread house.

"It looks like we're a few cars short of a Grand Prix," comments the pixel monster.

"If that's your way of asking where everyone is," replies the bug-eyed jockette, "then my reply would be to nod agreeably." Which she does.

"Ernie's gone viral," the plush doll offers.

"Info, please?"

"Dosequisvirus."

"What now?" asks the pixel monster.

"Yep. Picked it up at 'the Taqueria of Lost Souls, frick you, Tacoman,' according to his Facebook news feed."

The bug-eyed jockette frowns. "What about Theo?"

"Ever since he won that Best Tail award," the plush doll scoffs, "all he does is run around turning cartwheels in his black-and-white monkey-boy skin. Again, according to Ernie's Facebook feed."

A brief silence during which thoughts are pondered and deep-fried batter consumed.

"I kind of feel like we've become a spin-off show," the pixel monster murmurs eventually.

"Or a classic rock band with only two original members."

"ChipMates instead of Chips Ahoy!"

"*Ready Player One* without the Rush references."

"Crop sensor cameras."

"Dollar store dental floss."

"*Litterkimmy.*"

The pixel monster, bug-eyed jockette, and talking plush doll nod in unison.

“Pitter-patter.”
“Hard no.”
“Fugging embarrassing.”

## Boho Vandweller

**@theo**

"Sorry about the Bitcoin or Baby test," Shaka Brah apologizes. "I like to do a little judge of character thing before inviting newbies into my domain. Welcome aboard *Moyo*."

The infant I'd hesitantly rescued on Zebes has been replaced with my messenger bag, and the treacherous walkway of the Brinstar corridor has now become the back of a van. An unexpectedly rad van with a narrow desk and accompanying ottoman on one side, a small pantry and kitchen counter on the other, a twin-sized bed tucked at the very back, lots of cheerful wood and small potted plants and colorful carpeting and a whole lot of string lights and Deep Forest playing in the background—because *of course* Deep Forest is what a modern-day boho aficionado would listen to in his modern mobile eco jungle paradise that smells like the candle aisle at World Market. I've never considered living in the back of a van before, but I really, really want to live in this one.

Then it hits me: I'm in the back of a van.

While going full boho with a total stranger.

The ghost of Ernie poofs into existence beside me, a carton of popcorn in his hand and a told-you-so glint in his eye. "Curiosity killed the cat, bruh. You're the cat."

I scrunch my eyes shut; inside my head sounds the horrific rustle of a pair of colorful board shorts hitting the floor, the gentle coo of Shaka Brah's voice as he says, "You know they called me Blaze Master*schlong* on set, right?"

"Hey, Puck."

I open my eyes.

Ernie's ghost dissipates with a subtle fart.

Shaka, still fully-dressed—or as fully-dressed as you can be in shorts and anklets—must have caught some twitch in my face or bristle in my body language, because he's laughing and waving his hands back and forth. "Don't worry, I'm not into kidnapping and having my way with hapless loincloth guys. Or hapless women, for that matter. I'm asexual."

But a clever rapist *would* say something like that, wouldn't they? I glance past Shaka's shoulder, attempting to spot any evidence of previous sexual misconduct on the bed—

"I can appreciate the aesthetics, but I have no desire to participate in the traditional sense." Shaka offers me the ottoman, sits himself at the edge of the bed.

He gestures around the van's interior. "I borrowed a lot of layout ideas from the vanlife.journal Instagram feed. What do you think?"

"It sure is some, uh, ride," I say, sitting and resting my bag across my lap.

"It's more than a ride. *Moyo* is my home." Shaka taps his chest. "Full-time vandweller and Shakaist in the house."

I get the vandweller part. I'm guessing the Shakaist part has something to do with *Shaka Brah!* cosplay. "Shaka-what?"

"Shakaist. I founded and am a practitioner of Shakaism, itself a subculture of the boho subculture."

"You created your own subculture?"

Shaka shrugs, looks a tad bashful. "It's more...a philosophy or way of life, I guess. But yeah."

"L. Ron Hubbard would be proud." What else do you say to someone who's created their own religion?

"You think?" Shaka opens the topmost desk drawer. It's stocked neatly with row after row of every manner of tea bag you could ever imagine. "You strike me as a chamomile kind of guy."

I raise an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Your use of 'L. Ron Hubbard' in a joke."

# Shakaism

**@theo**

Shaka Brah grabs a pair of tea packets from the drawer and busies himself in the kitchen nook. I have absolutely no intention of taking even a sip, but if brewing chamomile is distraction enough from any tantalizing possibilities involving kidnapping, rape, or UFO abduction home videos, then I'll pretend to play along.

"Anyway," Shaka continues, "I started as a member of a weekend boho society. Some friends and I would get together to game or watch boho-related movies or TV shows. One particular night—to this day I can't remember exactly why—we binged all of *Shaka Brah!* while high. I think it was Throwback Night or something. With weed. We really got into it, too. Each of us skinned as a different character from the show—it's obvious which skin I installed—and I swear we found infinite wisdom in the lines and mannerisms of the Shaka Brah character. The conversation went from, 'What kind of parents rediscover their long-lost son being raised by big-breasted boho bikini natives on a tropical island paradise and all of the sudden force him to go back with them to southern California to finish his senior year of high school?' To, 'How cool would it be to cruise the trials and tribulations of city life by going boho in SoCal?' To, 'Like, there's no reason we shouldn't have cell phones or sports cars. We can *have* things, we just shouldn't *be* them, you know?' To, 'Like, think about how Shaka Brah living in the city is that ideal. You've got all the convenience of the city *environment*, but all the comforts of the *boho* lifestyle. I mean, humans created modern civilization to keep the wilderness at bay, right? What are clothes but a shelter from a wilderness that no longer exists? Like, if you think about it, the *more* developed a society is, the *less* clothing its citizens should wear. The *less* developed a society is, the *more* clothing its citizens should wear. Everything is backward, man!' To me finally joking, 'We should totally create our own boho subculture subculture! We could called it Shakaism!'" Shaka laughs, flashes me an over-the-shoulder smile. "That was the night Shakaism was created. Sugar? Honey?"

I shake my head. This is the most ridiculous origin story I've ever heard, and yet I can't stop listening. It's not because I'm particularly enthusiastic about stoner Shaka Brah worshippers—I just can't imagine where this is going.

"So, we finish the series," Shaka says, waiting for the kettle to go off. "Everyone sleeps in until noon the next day. We all go back to our day jobs after. I completely space about the Shakaism thing. Then, about a week later, the first of my followers, bikinied, backpacked, and ready to embrace her inner jungle paradise, sends me a

friend request on SuperMegaNet. And I'm like, *what? Who?* And she's like, 'Your Facebook page really inspired me to quit my job and hit the road full-time boho style.' I check my browser history; it turns out on *Shaka Brah!* binge night I created a Facebook page dedicated to Shakaism, its principals and core values, and I already have fifteen followers, all boho enthusiasts who've sold their houses, emptied their bank accounts, tossed out their wardrobes, and who're dead-set on becoming Shakaists."

(Hm. "Our day jobs." Stranger Danger meter just jumped a little—Shaka Brah and his friends do *not* necessarily sound like your average seventeen-year-olds.)

"In the year since, more and more people have joined the cause as well as spread the word. Something about a simpler, more minimalistic approach to modern-day living seems to be trending right now."

I furrow my brow. "So...it's like a back-to-nature kind of thing?"

"Not quite," Shaka replies. "The thing with Shakaism is, it's not about finding your way back *to* the jungle, so to speak. It's about bringing the jungle *with* you wherever you go. In *Shaka Brah!*, this was the visual metaphor of Shaka Brah practicing boho while navigating the SoCal sprawl. Likewise, Shakaism is the practice of bringing your jungle with you wherever you go. In other words, your jungle paradise isn't a place you someday hope to travel to, it's an *inner* state of being you create wherever you are or whomever you're with." Shaka grins. "Too many of us believe that happiness, adventure, inspiration, or fulfillment is a place that has to be reached, that it's traveling overseas, climbing mountains, going on safari. But we never get there because bills pile up, responsibilities weigh us down, and so we settle into lifelong complacency, always dreaming of going to our jungle island, but never actually getting there. With Shakaism, wherever you want to be, you're already there."

Seriously, Shaka Brah, how old are you? "That's, uh...wow. So, what does a subculture creator do, exactly?"

"I organize meet-ups, mostly," Shaka says, removing the kettle from the hotplate and filling a pair of inexplicably-attractive cream-colored coffee cups. "I also update and clarify the rules in the *Shakaist's Handbook*. You know, stuff like recommended diet, how to maintain strict, separate work and living spaces, complimentary versus invasive uses of tech, where to park your van overnight or get free Wi-Fi, how to make your own friendship bracelets—stuff like that."

"You must be really busy."

Shaka shrugs. "Busier than I used to be in some ways, yeah. But also way more effective. Honestly, since becoming a Shakaist, I'm calmer and more confident. I think more clearly and get more work done with less effort. When you strip away all the excesses of the modern world, you're left with the purest, most effective version of yourself you'll ever get to know. I've gotten *so* much more programming done just this last year than I'd ever gotten done before I converted. For the first time in my life, I'm *me*—" A notification sounds on his phone. "Crap. Sit tight for a second." He drops the tea bags, grabs his phone, does a quick swipe, a tap—and becomes an overweight thirty-something woman with pigtails and glasses. He—*she*

—then holds the phone up with the front camera aimed at her face and starts a video call with some boy who looks to be nine or ten. "Hi, baby. How are you?"

"I'm fine," the boy replies. "Are you still coming to dinner for my birthday next weekend?"

"Of course! I wouldn't miss it for all the pot pies in the entire world!"

"She's coming, Mom!" the boy yells, not quite off-camera enough to keep the audio from clipping. "Do you want me to tell her two o'clock?"

The boy's mom yells something unintelligible in the background.

Facing the camera again, and at a more appropriate volume level, the boy paraphrases: "Mom says to come at two o'clock, and she'll text you the address so you can GPS it."

"Thank you, sweets," Shaka says, and pretends to rub her nose against the touchscreen. "Tell your mom Auntie Valentina says hi, and she'll see you all soon, okay?"

"Okay, I will."

"Bye, sweetheart."

"Bye, Aunt Tina."

Shaka ends the call.

Swipes, taps, and becomes Shaka Brah once again.

Glances sheepishly over her—*his*—shoulder. "So...yeah. I'm a thirty-six-year-old woman who hasn't yet figured out how to tell her sister's family she identifies as a teenage boho boy."

## Making the Virtual Actual

**@theo**

"Don't look at me like that," Shaka Brah says. "So I'm a few years shy of forty. *You're* twenty-one. We're both faking outside our age groups. So what?" He turns his back to me, pretends to be too busy making tea to look me in the eye.

Meanwhile, all I'm thinking is, *twenty-one?* Where'd that number come from? I whip out my phone and visit my SuperMegaNet profile—oh, that's right. I'd lied about my age when I first signed up for an account. That, and the profile pic I uploaded was intentionally vague:

You can hardly tell I'm human, much less twelve years old. Which, I guess, explains why Shaka approached me on the Semantic Web: he'd found the profile of a twenty-one-year-old Web designer identifying as an RKO Radio Pictures starlet who also seems to be into boho, and had assumed I'd be chill to hang.

I quickly put my phone away as Shaka serves my tea. Fathoming the cherry blossom print on the saucer, I ask, "So...how'd you know my real name?"

"Like I said," Shaka replies, "since converting to Shakaism, I've gotten *so* much more hacking done. Much of said hacking being how to fake as Shaka Brah while actual."

"We're actual now?" I'd assumed this was some kind of #vanlife server.

"Mm-hm."

I blink around *Moyo's* interior, down at my arms and legs, still black and white, still not my own. I know Beta worked some coding magic to augment Jan's default skin, but I thought that was the extent of it: making up for missing bytes. Shaka Brah looks as actual as if Blaze Masterson himself had decided to time travel forward from the nineties for the purpose of taking part in what most certainly has to be an elaborate prank of some kind. Still, I have to ask, "We're persistently skinned?"

"A little something I've been working on."

"But...I thought—"

"That skinning is 'a beta feature of SuperMegaNet [which] currently only works in video chat?'" Shaka smiles, sets his mug on the desk, sits again. "Persistent skinning has actually been a SuperMegaNet feature since the pre-alpha days. It just hasn't been made public for a variety of reasons, both technical and legal. If you ask Taurus' programmers, they'll say the code hasn't been thoroughly vetted. On the legal side, the powers that be are afraid of SMN users deepfaking *en masse* as celebrities, athletes, heads of state... But *hello*—hundreds of thousands of cosplayers fake every year at Anime Expo alone. Just because my costume of choice is digital instead of fabric or latex doesn't make my being Shaka Brah any more nefarious than if I'd simply gone boho in my default skin. More importantly, I'm not faking as Blaze Masterson, I'm faking Shaka Brah *as played by* Blaze Masterson. I'm not the celebrity, I'm one of his characters."

That's probably as gray of an area as has ever been. "As long as there's Wi-Fi."

"As long as there's Wi-Fi, yeah." Shaka Brah reaches over and steeps his tea bag. "That's where the work comes in."

"The work?"

"Making the virtual actual. As in liberating the SuperMegaNet source code."

I steep my bag as well.

"Imagine a world where billions of people are using SuperMegaNet. Taurus can't possibly handle the bandwidth. How can a single company support legion? The closed-source model is outdated. But free the source, free ourselves."

Why do I feel like Shaka Brah is about to ask me to sign a petition?

"For example, if you had the SMN source code, you could keep things like this from happening." Shaka gestures at my torso. "Instead of waiting for a single closed-source company to patch a bug, the global open source community takes a look at the code and provides a fix almost immediately. That's not even the big picture."

"It isn't?"

Shaka Brah abandons his tea bag, leans forward. "You upload to a server, right? Your default skin is encoded byte-for-byte as pure data. Ones and zeroes. That's all you are when you're virtual. Now, what's to stop someone from reprogramming their default skin if they want to? Change a few bytes and uninstall cancer, for example? Install a working kidney? A full head of hair? The tech is there—Taurus is just sitting on it until they can figure out how to safely monetize the technology. Meantime, we're out here in the actual world getting sick, aging, and dying while the Holy Grail is literally in the palms of our hands."

"Persistent skinning," I reiterate.

Shaka Brah nods. "*Truly* persistent skinning, without the need for Wi-Fi augmentation. The skins feature is supposedly intended for virtual use only—despite the fact that SuperMegaNet's basic uploading and downloading process *already rearranges our bytes inherently.* It's the closed-source code that restricts us to our original skins when actual, or hacked persistent skins limited to whatever Wi-Fi signal you happen to be standing near. The sky should be the limit, though. An Alzheimers patient uploads onto an SMN server. Erroneous plaques are

uninstalled from their brain. They download again with proper cognition regained —persistently. Or what about cancer patients? People with AIDS? Diabetes? Burn victims? Influenza? You upload sick on one end, download healthy on the other. *Persistently.* How many lives could be saved, how many trillions of dollars could be shifted from obsolete healthcare to more lucrative pursuits if all we have to do to keep ourselves young, healthy, and vigorous is tap or swipe?"

Interesting point. I'd never really thought about it before. SuperMegaNet *can* encode a person into a data stream and then decode them into actuality again.

So, why *can't* changes be made along the way?

## Pompidou

**@theo**

"But wouldn't the planet turn to crap with a bunch of immortal SuperMegaNet users running around?" I ask.

"The planet's *already* crap, and we're hardly immortal," Shaka Brah says. "If anything, immortality would have the opposite effect. People don't care about the environment because they know they'll be dead in a few short decades. Let future generations deal with it. But if we knew we'd be around for hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of years, suddenly we'd care more because we'd be around to have to live through it ourselves."

Or *Ready Player One* becomes the world, with everyone choosing the OASIS over actuality, and actuality is just where we store our servers or exile our undesirables. I continue to steep my tea. "All of this seems kind of complicated for a Shakaist basing his life on simplicity."

"Well, big ideas, simple life."

"That would make a cool T-shirt."

"Is Redbubble still a thing?"

"Was it ever?"

"*Burn.*"

We share a brief laugh.

Then I say, "You mentioned earlier that you could help me with my skin problem."

Nodding, Shaka Brah opens one of his desk drawers and pulls out a battered-looking smartphone. He taps something out. "Done. I've re-enabled access to your default skin. You can find it in your skins list."

I'm tempted to go default (and back in color!) here and now—but I hesitate, phone in hand, thumb hovering over the touchscreen. Shaka thinks I'm twenty-one. If I suddenly become my true self...well, let's just say adults tend to disregard me the instant they realize I'm underage. Shaka Brah this Valentina woman may be, I'm almost certain he'd be less enthusiastic about hanging boho with me if he knew I'm just a kid. And I still want to hang—long enough to figure out what this dude is all about. Like, I don't necessarily want to be friends with him; I just want to...*know*.

"Thanks," I say. "I, uh, owe you one."

"Happy to help out," Shaka says. "And if you really want to owe me one, I'm always on the lookout for new coders to add to my buddy list."

"What, me?" I'm proud of my markup and scripting abilities, but I'm a Web kind of guy. I can program—I don't think I can *hack*, though. "I just do Web sites."

"I'm not going to lie, there were probably a dozen other able candidates on the Semantic Web server who would've fit the bill. But you fit the dress code." Shaka Brah chuckles, nods at my loincloth. "Also, you're friends with Beta."

*Pompidou!*

A thought bubble pops up beside my head. In it, Beta and I are sprawled on my bedroom floor and are working each other over in *Super Smash Bros*.

"Not to worry you or anything," Thought Bubble Beta says, "but we should have a plan."

"A plan for what?" Thought Bubble Me asks.

"The off chance they come looking for me."

"Who?"

"Taurus Labs. The government. Both, maybe."

"I thought you said you were untraceable."

"Oh, I'm 99.99% sure I am. But it's always good to be prepared for that .01%."

"Um, okay."

"We need a code word."

"Like what?"

"Something simple but obscure." Thought Bubble Beta thinks for a moment. "*Pompidou*."

Thought Bubble Me raises an eyebrow. "*Pompidou*?"

"Yeah. Like the 2015 Matt Lucas series. It means nothing to no one. If suspicious peoples ever come around dropping my name, text '*Pompidou*' to me as a head's up."

The thought bubble pops out of existence, leaving me nervous and jittery and absolutely positive that Shaka Brah is some kind of special agent sent to nab Beta and arrest me for aiding a wanted digital refugee. I mean, that makes at least a little more sense than a boho vandweller out to reinstall the world from behind his laptop. Doesn't it?

Hair suddenly matted.

Bead of sweat trickling down my forehead.

Toes of one monkey foot curled and tapping nervously against the floor.

Fingers like breakfast sausages trying to nonchalantly text Beta without Shaka Brah noticing.

"What are you doing?" Shaka asks, *totally* noticing.

"Um...playing *Angry Birds*."

## Help Me, Obi-Wan

**@theo**

I put my phone away, wipe my forehead. "Beta, huh?" I ask, trying to be casually obscure.

"That *is* what Simon's calling himself these days," Shaka Brah says.

Oh, God, is there a butt puddle forming beneath me? "Sounds like something he'd, uh, do." Again with the obscurity.

"Relax—I'm not a cop or the FBI or anything. I spotted his name on your buddy list—and recognized the Asian beefcake skin from a group pic your friend Ernie posted on Instagram."

(Freaking Ernie! He's got to be the only fat-ass in the world who posts to Instagram using *other* people's phones.)

"By the way, never use ******* as your password. Or any word you can find in a dictionary, for that matter."

Despite my monochrome demeanor, my cheeks are currently flaming red.

"But hey, no judgment here. Anyway, Beta and I are acquainted. *Were* acquainted. I'd like to change that."

*Ugh.* Why on *Earth* am I still using ******* as my password? "Why don't you just hack his account, too?"

"Beta's a little craftier with his passwords," Shaka laughs, "and he's on a local network these days. Your home network, if I'm not mistaken—"

The Blush continues.

"—but don't worry. Just because I have the power to break and enter doesn't mean I ever do or ever will."

"Are you sure about that?"

Shaka Brah thinks for a moment. "A knife is neither good nor bad. It can be used to kill, but it can also be used to butter your bread." He does something on his phone, nods at me. "I just texted you."

I check my messenger for Shaka's text, noting that the sender is just a bunch of random letters and numbers. More important is the text itself, which includes a series of shady-looking phone pics of various CBS and Paramount clapperboards. But that's not even the interesting part. The interesting parts are the titles printed on the clapperboards:

- *Crusher: Warlord Traveler*
- *National Lampoon's Starfleet Academy*

• *Orangeshirts: True-Life Stories from the Starship Enterprise Janitorial Crew*
• *Everybody Loves Polaski*
• *The Outrageous Okonas*

I look up at Shaka Brah.

Shaka Brah smiles and nods. "Yep. No fewer than five new *Star Trek* series have been green-lit and are currently in production. Want to see the pilot scripts?"

"Where'd you get these from?" I ask, salivating.

"I have a guy on the inside. *Want to see the scripts?*"

"Yes, please."

Shaka Brah takes a long sip of tea, then folds his hands in his lap, fixes me with a steady gaze. "Help me, Obi-Wan," he says, as stoic as Princess Leia ever was. "This is the future, the new world economy—agile, highly configurable users telecommuting from small, mobile jungles all over the world. Easily-manageable distributed communities to replace the conglomerates. But old gods die hard. The oldschool regime won't give up the stranglehold on our time and our data until it's way beyond logistically and economically impossible for Big Corporation to employ everyone under a single banner. It doesn't have to get worse before it gets better, though. Beta has privileges I don't. Together we can free the code. Just ask him if he'll get in touch with me. Tell him..." Shaka thinks for a sec. "...tell him Valentina wants to talk."

I shrug, feeling like I'm about to buy a bunch of cocaine or something. This whole thing sounds more epic than what I'm used to. I mean, offer me a Web design gig for Shakaist meet-ups and I'm down. But reinstalling the world in the image of a vandwelling Shaka Brah cosplayer? That's kind of sort of *too* epic.

And yet my Trekkie half is *so* tantalized by the prospect of not one, not two, not three or four, but *five* new *Trek* series—one of which is supposedly titled *The Outrageous Okonas*. Plural!

"I'll, uh...see what I can do," I reply.

Shaka Brah smiles and holds up his hand. "Shaka, brah?"

"Huh?"

"All good?"

"Oh. Um, sure." I hold up my hand. "Shaka."

"Later, Puck Martin."

"Later, Shaka Brah."

He swipes me back home. I dump my stuff onto the floor, sit at the edge of my bed. I bring up the SuperMegaNet app on my phone and tap the skins list. There are two entries:

• Default
• **Puck Martin [SELECTED]**
» *Install skin...*
» *Uninstall skin...*

I tap "Default." Following a brief delay, I'm myself again, older, (slightly) bigger, clothed, and in living color. Instinctively, my thumb taps "Uninstall skin..." and hovers over Puck's name. I can't accidentally be skinned as the little bugger if he isn't installed to begin with and/or I refrain from ever again visiting Thrill-Kill's *Puck* server, right? But then I think of Shaka Brah, who knows what Puck Martin looks and sounds like, and not what Theo Ivanovich looks and sounds like. As much as I loathe reverting to ten-year-old monochrome monkey-boy form, I'd rather throw Puck (and not myself) under the bus should Shaka turn out to be some kind of super-mega-ultra-stalker.

I close the skins list, leaving it untouched for now, and lie back in bed, staring up at the ceiling and reeling under the force of a bigger picture. I now have the ability to be persistently skinned, just like Jan and Beta. Huh. Why didn't Beta give the rest of the Runt Squad that feature when he augmented Jan's bytes? I know we didn't *need* it, but...

Mini crawls out from beneath one of my legs. Panting for breath, he says, "Holy Hannah Montana! You have *not* lived until you've spent a day and a night smothered inside a loincloth!" He pauses, catching the pensive expression on my face. "What's eating your brain?"

"Shakaism."

"What's that?"

"It's like...what if instead of seeking out a Utopian society in which to live, the Utopian society lives inside of us? What if in putting Shaka Brah and Beta together I'd be enabling a new era of peace and prosperity—"

—*eh*.

Grown woman living inside a teenage boho dude's body.

Moving on.

A while later, Beta's doing an over-stimulated warrior-geek impression as he downloads into Theo's bedroom: "Okay, little dude. I'm still working on the problem, but in the meantime I can get you some skin-on-skin action using a replica of your original skin that we can temporarily install over Puck Martin until I've had a chance to..." He trails off, noticing Theo's appearance. "Hey, you're default again."

Theo, sitting crosslegged across from me on the floor (we're playing Gin), nods and says, "Valentina wants to talk." He discards a four of diamonds.

Beta blinks down at us. "She does?"

"Mm-hm."

"How'd you two, er, meet?"

"On the Semantic Web server."

"Oh. So...what's she up to?"

"*He's* deepfaking as Shaka Brah, and has created and converted to Shakaism. And he really wants to get in touch with you. Gin."

Crap. I'd really thought that four of diamonds had been a mistake. "You win again, Mr. Ungar."

"That's...huh. Okay. I mean, cool beans. Cool beans." Beta's frown, however, would seem to indicate that said beans are, in fact, *not* cool. "She—*he*—took care of your skinning issue?"

Theo leans back, stretches his legs. "Yeah. I had to rescue this baby from a lava corridor on Brinstar first. Shaka Brah basically hacked my account. I think he's hacked most of SuperMegaNet, actually. He's got this plan to 'free the code' or something."

Beta looks...disappointed? "Did he say anything specific about me?"

"Nope, just that he wants to talk to you, and that you have *privileges*." Theo stands and faces him matter-of-factly. "Who's this Shaka Brah forward-slash Valentina to you, anyway?"

Beta relaxes his stance, puts on the most forced smile you ever saw. "Just an old acquaintance."

I hold up a card with both hands. "Care to join us?"

"Maybe next time. Errands got me." Hem. Haw.

"Yeah," Theo says, "and I've got, uh, homework. You know." Hem. Haw.

"Roger that." Beta takes out his phone. "*Trine 4* next time you're free?"

"For sure."

"Later, little dudes." He swipes out.

I look at Theo. "That was awkward."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see it?"

Theo shrugs, sits. "See what?"

"The shock, the betrayal. Beta's supposed to be your one and only tech support guru, and here you are going to strange solarpunks in the backs of vans instead."

"I didn't *go*—Shaka Brah *came*—I wasn't expecting—it's not like that, Mini."

"It is to Beta."

"Is not."

"Dude, this was basically VHS telling Betamax, 'Bruh. It's over.'"

"I'm sure he would've figured out the skinning thing eventually. He just needed a little more time..." Theo bites his lip, looks like he truly wants to defend Beta's honor. But all he can come up with is, "Okay, maybe it was a *little* like VHS telling Betamax it's over."

# Double Feature: Toilet Paper

**@mark**

"*Unfortunately, last week's cafeteria closure hasn't impacted the cases of wandering indigestion, violent diarrhea, and projectile vomiting currently sweeping Boca Linda High School,"* Principal Sandalwood had informed everyone during morning announcements. "*Therefore, starting next Monday, all classes will be suspended for two weeks. During this time, administration will continue to monitor the dosequisvirus pandemic as well as coordinate with state and federal officials. Thank you, and God bless...do I let go of the button now?"*

But it's business as usual for Coach Coffee, who's got us doing our drills and skills as if he's going to personally take care of the pandemic over the weekend so as to not disrupt our next wrestling match.

(It's also business as usual for Mrs. Thrailkill, sitting on a folding chair at the foot of the bleachers and recording the proceedings on her cell phone with casual indifference. She's been doing that a lot lately—*research*, something I overheard her saying about "behavioral studies of the adolescent male posterior.")

We haven't even finished warm-up, though, when Coffee barks, "Howard!" and calls me off the practice mat, jerks his thumb toward the gym entrance, where my dad's waiting with my gym bag.

I jog over to him. "What's going on, Dad?" I ask. I take my bag and follow him out the door.

"We've got a house to shoot," he replies.

"Oh, cool. Just let me get changed—"

"No time, son."

"But Dad—"

"*No time."*

FYI, my dad's a real estate photographer. It's not unusual for him to pick me up from school after wrestling practice and have me ride along with him on a twilight shoot. It *is* unusual for him to do so at the very start of practice and without letting me change first. Maybe traffic's heavy or something. Or maybe all the dosequisvirus stuff in the news has finally freaked him out to the point where he's not waiting until Monday to grab the family and get the hell out of Dodge.

It's overcast outside. We hurry across the parking lot and into Dad's Optima. We're headed for Mallomar Bay—that much I glean from the nav on Dad's phone. Otherwise, the drive is pretty quiet. Dad tries the radio, but there's only sad violin music on all of the stations. He picks the least melancholy and grips the steering

wheel steadily with both hands, stares solemnly at the road the entire time. I sit speechless in the passenger seat and stare out the window. There's a detour at this one intersection where the toilet paper lines winding around the Spendco parking lot have created a gridlock. Police officers armed with rifles are trying to maintain a semblance of order. A few miles further, a mob of zombie-like pedestrians are dismembering the driver of an overturned Lärabar truck. Further yet: grandmas in surgical masks trying to fill five-gallon water containers from an open fire hydrant.

WTF? This whole dosequisvirus thing is crazy. People aren't afraid of getting sick, they're afraid of running out of toilet paper. And Lärabars.

I try not to look out the window again until we reach Mallomar and the two-story beach house overlooking the bay (it turns out we *are* doing an actual photoshoot). The realtor is blond and petite and named Penny. She guides us inside the house, giving notes to my dad about what she wants, what she doesn't as we move through the first floor, then the second, Dad with his camera and tripod, me in my helmet, singlet, pads, and lingering look of confusion. My job is to caddie Dad's enormous camera bag, make sure that all the lights are on in each room, and that the furniture is positioned properly. I'm also supposed to check that any stray personal items belonging to the owners are hidden out of shot. It's not the worst way to pick up an extra hundred bucks (Dad always pays me for my time), though I'm not going to lie, I'm counting the seconds until we go on break so that I can sneak into the bathroom and ditch the Spandex for jeans and a hoodie.

My chance comes when we shoot the master bathroom. Penny happens to step out into the hallway to take a phone call, and that's when I ask Dad for the car keys.

"Sure," he says. "But first..." He hands me the camera bag, leans in close, whispers into my ear, "It's empty. Grab as much toilet paper as you can fit—there's a twenty-four pack under the vanity. I'll distract Penny." He pushes me into the bathroom and closes the door.

And I'm just standing there in a stranger's master bathroom with an empty camera bag in hand, and I'm wondering what Dad has planned for next week when we all run out of bottled water.

## Beta's Fuddy-Duddy Moment

**@intermezzo**

Puck Martin downloads inside *Moyo* and wordlessly stands beside Shaka Brah, who's sipping tea at his desk and, much like the rest of the known world, is watching a dosequisvirus livestream on his laptop.

"Well," Puck says after several minutes, "it looks like you got your wish."

Shaka Brah blinks back at him. "What wish?"

"Shakaism via proxy."

Shaka Brah watches the news a moment longer before replying, "Not funny, monkey-boy."

**@beta**

I'm thinking heavy thoughts. So, naturally, I'm in the bathroom at The Billboard, this actual open-air, urban-industrial bar and grill that's built into the back of a giant billboard with (you guessed it) "The Billboard" printed on the facing in tall, bold letters. Much like how most musicians go to the bathroom to compose their best riffs, I've come here to do my best thinking. Instead, though, I'm having a major fuddy-duddy moment. As in I'm *not* digging the playlist blaring over the PA. When did music start sucking absolute balls? It sounds like two completely unrelated songs playing over one another. This is what today's kids are listening to while they bang and smoke weed?

ZOMFG.

Please tell me I'm not simply getting old enough that all music, movies, and carbonated beverages—*get off my lawn!*—have become unappealing forevermore.

A toilet flushes; an obnoxious ringtone interrupts half the music—

"Yo," says the guy in the adjacent stall. "I'm taking a dump. What's up?"

—and it occurs to me that what I'd actually been listening to *was* two completely unrelated songs playing over each another, one through the PA, the other on the poop-dude's phone speaker.

Back to the heavy thoughts. I do my best The Thinker impression, elbow braced against my knee, knuckles tucked into my chin, attention aimed away from poop-dude's loud conversation about bitches this, paychecks that. Val—Shaka Brah, I mean—is doing it. She—*he*—always swore he would. Free the code, liberate the world, delete the old, reinstall the new. I joked about it during our days at

Taurus, back when I was still actual and he was still a woman and we were both still kind of sort of dating each other. "Someday," I remember him saying on a random lunch break. "Someday we're going to liberate the code, make the virtual actual. Someday SuperMegaNet is going to change the *world*, Simon. Screw the government contracts and the suits upstairs and all the NDA stuff. Someday *real people* are going to benefit from what we've created."

I guess this is someday.

Why, then, am I trembling in my designer jeans?

Leaving the stall, I exit the bathroom and move through The Billboard's subtle, recessed lighting, transcending casual conversation between hipster twenty-somethings, inhaling heady whiffs of trending cologne, and ending up outside on the catwalk with its epic view of Los Angeles below. The Billboard opens after dark, closes before dawn, and so if you download here, you'll only ever see the LA sprawl under the shadow of night, the way God intended.

There's a staircase at one end of the catwalk. Weaving between the handful smokers and cell phone texters, I take the stairs down and cross the parking lot, walk right up to where the asphalt gives way to dirt and shrubs. Here The Billboard's Wi-Fi signal has degraded noticeably. I can tell because I'm artifacting, and parts of me have become downright pixelated. I'm in no real danger, though. If I try to walk down the street, I'll simply be bounced back onto Theo's bedroom server. Funny. We call it "persistent skinning," being skinned while actual, but you still need a Wi-Fi signal in order for it to work. You still need the crutch. I've been on the crutch for...how long now? Unimportant. The crutch was supposed to be a temporary stopgap. You don't actually *need* a Wi-Fi signal once your molecules have been decoded however and wherever you want to be. We programmed the limitation intentionally. We were ninety-percent sure truly persistent skinning would work, but we hadn't tested it throughly enough to guarantee that coveted ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-percent. Then I had my "accident," Taurus had their falling out with the shareholders, and SuperMegaNet went beta indefinitely.

Except now Shaka Brah's going to remove the crutch for all SuperMegaNet users.

And I'm...concerned. Concerned that maybe the code is only ninety-*five*-percent ready, concerned that what happened to me might happen to someone else. And I'm...hesitant to become truly actual again. Reconfigured in the Asian muscle hunk body of my choice, but still actual. Mortal. Vulnerable. Multiple sclerosis screwed me over once; I suppose I'm afraid if I'm actual there's the possibility it'll happen again—or else some *other* affliction or calamity will befall me. As limited as I am living on a server, I'm safe, untouched by age, disease, injury, or the passage of time—as long as I've got reliable backups and Wi-Fi at my disposal. Honestly? I don't want to promise true actuality to the masses when maybe the app isn't ready yet, when maybe the world isn't ready yet.

But is the world really not ready?

Or am *I* not ready?

*Le sigh.*

This is definitely one of those fuddy-duddy moments when life feels like listening to two completely unrelated songs at the same time.

# Remember the Santanas?

**@theo**

I'm self-isolating with the TV on for white noise when this happens:

"*We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news out of Mallomar Bay, where Mayor Dude Coolson is live-streaming San Angelico's emergency response to the dosequisvirus epidemic. We now go live to the valet area outside of Provenance.*"

The picture transitions to shaky smartphone footage of Coolson, who's been surrounded by an angry mob that appears to have ambushed him between the restaurant entrance and his just-valeted luxury sedan.

"*My fellow Angelicans,*" he says, removing the napkin from his collar and motioning with his hands in a calming manner, "*please be assured that you are not alone in these dire times. As we speak, local and state authorities are coordinating their efforts to ensure that the dosequisvirus epidemic is met head-on, and with minimal detriment to our economy. I've just signed off on a bill that will repurpose this year's unused Santana Winds Disaster Preparedness Plan. It's going to be hard. Sacrifices will have to be made by each and every one of us, but I'm confident that we can come together in a time of crisis and lead this great nation of ours by example. If we are diligent, if we are obedient, if we are willing to do whatever it takes, I can assure you that this time next month, our dosequisvirus numbers will be down to zero.*

"*To that end, effective immediately, we're shutting down the power grid as a preventative measure to deter wildfires. All non-essential clothes and coverings will be disallowed so as to prevent the spread of rogue embers and viruses via ultra-flammable apparel, reusable cloth tote bags, dry skin, and the like. We're setting up checkpoints throughout the city that will distribute spray bottles so that our citizens can maintain a healthy sheen at all times. We've already distributed over fifty-thousand energy-saver vouchers, and I'd like to hit the one-hundred-thousand mark by next week. These vouchers can be exchanged for flame-retardant swimwear and bath towels.*

"*Go about your daily business. Walk your pets. Share your selfies. Pay your bills on time.*" Coolson glances irritably at the jeans of an attractive woman onlooking nearby. "*And for God's sake, take your clothes off.*"

Meanwhile, via Eva's SuperMegaNet feed, I spot Ernie standing in front of his grandparents' house with a kite lying broken on the lawn.

"This whole thing is stupid," he says, and hurls the kite's spool to the ground.

Eva switches her phone to selfie mode and nods in agreement.

# A Swiftly Distancing Planet

**@ernie**

"*The DOSVID-19 Diaries*, episode one. The world as we know it is gone. In its place, a nearly-identical facsimile made up of familiar driveways and lawns, picket fences and mailboxes. I always pictured a post-dosequisvirus world as some kind of apocalyptic wasteland. You know, all dust, tumbleweeds, and skies of ashen gray. Instead, it's still just suburbia, it's still just my neighborhood block, it's still all the same people jogging or walking their dogs or trimming their hedges on a sunny afternoon. But the differences are there. Spray bottles instead of cell phones. Swimwear instead of street clothes. Round-the-clock social distancing. Lush green lawns. Clear blue sky. Lysol on the breeze. An entire populace watering the grass, watering themselves, maintaining their sheens at all times. This is the future. This is the year 2020—"

"Dude," Theo snarks. "Are you ripping the intro from *Turbo Kid*?"

I glare at him, hit the stop button on my tape recorder. "Future generations will laud my tapes for their pop culture savvy as well as their historical accuracy!"

"Future generations won't even know what a tape is, much less play yours."

"*Current* generations don't know what a tape is," Eva adds.

I glare at the two of them sitting smugly in their plastic lawn chairs, Theo in his trendy board shorts, Eva in her gaudy, fruit salad-patterned swimsuit. A heavily-artifacted version of Jan is lying sprawled on the grass, and, looking very European in his cheap Medicaid surgical Speedo, is working on his sheen (with the power off, SuperMegaNet is no longer online, and so his missing bytes are no longer augmented). We're having a lawn party out in front of my grandparents' house. What's a lawn party? It's where you and your friends get together—six feet apart from each other, of course—and water your lawn while maintaining your sheen. The idea is to deter rogue wildfire embers by eliminating any and all dry, flammable surfaces. But it's all bullflop, because people aren't catching *fire*, they're catching *dosequisvirus*. Everybody knows this, everybody's thinking it, but we're all too busy social distancing to actually *talk* about it.

"I'm just wondering where the heck you got a tape recorder in the first place," Jan tells me, and reaches lazily for his spray bottle, sets off a cloud of mist above himself, then closes his eyes as the droplets settle on his pixelated pecs.

"My stupid grandparents won't let me have a cell phone until I'm eighteen," I reply. "Besides, there's no power anyway, so I'm making do with this monstrosity for as long as the batteries last. Hose me down!"

Eva picks up her bottle and shoots a half-assed vapor plume my way, the remains of which barely moisten my big toe.

Ernie is not amused! "What the hell was that?"

Theo rolls his eyes. Sighs. "Sheen check."

Like good little shaggy-haired citizens (the barber shops are closed), the gang springs into action, spraying each other down, checking for wet hair, glistening skin. Well, they're checking each other. I, on the other hand, am being totally ignored.

"Hey!" I shout at them. "What about the fat kid?"

Eva nods at Theo.

Who nods at Jan.

Who nods back.

Theo calmly walks over to the side of the house, picks up the garden hose, cranks the tap wide open, and—oh, geez!—turns the fugging thing on me.

"*Blaaarg!*" I scream, falling out of my chair and cradling the tape recorder against my chest. "I am *not* a lawn! This is abuse! Screw you, RKO! *I hope you get dosequisvirus and die!*"

Theo drops the hose, turns off the water, sits back in his plastic chair, air-high-fives Jan and Eva.

"I'm waterlogged!" I scream, spitting water.

"Yeah," Jan says, "but at least you won't catch fire."

# The Butt Rag Option

**@ernie**

I roll into a sitting position and sit slumped as I try pointlessly to wipe off my tape recorder. "What are we doing? What have we become? Dressed like hippies, no TV, no Internet, not a single roll of toilet paper for a hundred square miles! Did you know I've been having to wash my rump in the bathtub after every loaf I drop? The *bathtub!*"

Eva raises an eyebrow. "Wait—wouldn't that mean your rear is actually cleaner than if you'd just used toilet paper?"

"It's the principle of the thing! I'm squatting in a bathtub after my poos and picking dingleberries from my crack with my bare hands!"

"Do you wash yourself with soap after?"

"Of course!"

"Then what's the problem?"

"Yeah," Jan says. "You're making big fish out of small potatoes."

I grab a clump of lawn and hurl it in his general direction. "And how are you wiping *your* rear?"

"I use a...how do you say 'butt rag' in English?"

"*Ew!*"

"What?"

"A butt rag? *Really?*"

"What's the big deal? You use it, then you wash it with soap and water right after."

I think I'm about to hurl. "Remind me never to shake your hand ever again."

Jan smirks, leans forward, waves his dirty Czech hands at me.

"*Ack!* Six feet! Social distancing!"

Theo shakes his head. "Ernie, you're overreacting as usual..." He trails off, catching sight of something in the air above him.

I follow his gaze.

We *all* follow his gaze.

Our eyes locking on that single wicked ember.

As the sky goes crimson.

Without further hesitation, Theo grabs his spray bottle and freaking *springs*, like, ten feet into the air, extinguishing the ember with this unexpectedly ninja-like flourish. He lands in a crouch worthy of Spiderman himself, and with the bluest of steel says, "Plus-ten XP."

All of us gawk as "+10 XP", written in a retro video game font, rises above his head, fades after a second.

Steel and crimson then subsiding, Theo replaces himself in his chair, continues the conversation as if nothing happened: "Anyway, does anyone else find it funny that SuperMegaNet's always-on feature has finally been defeated, and all it took was a pandemic and massive citywide power outage to do it?"

Still gawking.

"I mean, in parts of the world where the power's still on, streaming services are lowering the quality of their videos. Online orders are taking a month to be fulfilled. What's the point of all this technology and infrastructure if it's only effective when *some* of us use it *some* of the time?" Theo pauses, no longer able to ignore our dropped jaws and bug eyes. "What? It was just an ember."

I clear my throat, chuckle nervously. "Plus-five XP at best," I say, and lurch to my feet, move my plastic lawn chair just a little further away.

Eva and Jan do the same.

# The Why of I

**@theo**

"Accessorizing, are we?"

I'm so mesmerized by the spectacle of Freud in nothing but a bath towel that his earring question catches me off guard. Thanks to dosequisvirus restrictions, we're having today's head session out in the parking lot behind his office, the two of us seated six feet apart on cheap plastic chairs.

"I guess," I reply. Stalling for time, I pretend to be checking my sheen, and grab my spray bottle, mist one of my arms as I #TBT to that one intermezzo in which Shaka Brah and I sat in his van and watched a dosequisvirus livestream on his laptop.

"Why Shaka Brah?" I'd asked him at one point. "Why not any other boho brah?"

Shaka had shrugged. "I once took an online quiz, 'Who's your inner-child?' and got Shaka Brah. Naïve, compassionate, good with a bow and arrow, no fashion sense, into herbal teas, Sagittarius. And I thought, yeah. I'm okay with that being who I am and how I want to express myself."

It was a...reasonable answer.

Now that I'm being questioned adjacently, I'm not so sure my answer is as reasonable.

Freud waits.

I watch as a tiny goldcrest emerges from the furry nest of his navel. Paraphrasing Shaka, I say, "I'm okay with being who I am and expressing myself how I like."

"Would you say showing off makes you more comfortable in your own skin?"

"Heck no. I *hate* showing off."

"Then why the showy earring? Why the provocative new hairstyle?"

Why indeed? "It's...it's kind of like when I play as Baby Mario in *Mario Kart*. He handles well with the karts I like, but really I pick him because playing as Baby Mario suggests a level of nonchalance that would be impossible if I were to go with Bowser or Donkey Kong. Like, remember *Ready Player One*? Remember how everyone was skinned uber-handsome, sexy, fit, cool? Nobody thought their original skins were good enough—they had to fake as someone they thought was better than themselves. You *knew* everyone was compensating for something. But what's more confident than faking as yourself? Maybe you tease your hair or get a Dragon Ball attached to your ear or whatever—you show off as the world expects

you to, but the idea that you're still being *you* is the ultimate display of nonchalance."

"So, *appearing* nonchalant is your way of convincing yourself and those around you that you're *feeling* nonchalant, yes?"

"It's...it's my own weird kind of confidence, I guess."

"Confidence," Freud says, "or perhaps *crutch*?"

Is that a track from *Blade Runner* playing in the distance?

Freud leans back, smiles knowingly. "Describe in single words only the good things that come into your mind about...your mother."

# Uncouth

**@eva**

Me and Mom are in the checkout lane at Spendco when the argument erupts behind us.

"You've got a lot of nerve," says the Speedo geezer to the jeans and T-shirt millennial.

"Oh, yeah?" says the jeans and T-shirt millennial to the Speedo geezer.

"Yeah. It's people like you who're the reason we need to wear swimsuits!"

"Because people like *you* hoarded all the swimsuits!"

"Whippersnapper! *We* hoarded the swimsuits because *y'all* dosequisvirus deniers were spreading around embers like nobody's business, what with your fancy-schmancy designer jeans and ultra-flammable baseball caps!"

Since the PA's down, the cashier cups his hands around his mouth and yells: "Security to register six! Code Gray! Security to register six! *Code Gray!*"

Mom and I look at each other, apprehension in our eyes.

"What the heck is a Code Gray?" I ask her.

"Go stand over there while I finish paying," Mom whispers into my ear, and gives my head a quick squirt with her spray bottle as she gently pushes me away from the general vicinity of the checkout lane.

I head toward the front of the store—and inadvertently find myself standing at this colorful booth sporting a giant banner that reads, "DOSVID-19: go boho, save lives." And indeed, seated at the accompanying table is a bright-eyed, sun-kissed, bleach-blond beach chick wearing a skimpy bikini and various assorted pieces of handmade bling.

She smiles prettily at me. "Why, hello there, sweetie!"

There's all kinds of sheen-related crap spread out on the tabletop. I pick up a spray bottle and pretend to be interested in its being neon pink. Really, I'm too embarrassed to simply turn and walk away, thereby admitting that I've made a grave error in exploring Spendco's prow. "You have, uh, a nice collection here."

Bleach-Blond Beach Chick leans back in her chair and stretches, seeming to revel in her own personal space. "Why, thank you! Everything's handmade by Milda's of Portland, you know. Clothing may be restricted during the dosequisvirus epidemic, but that doesn't mean you can't still look fabulous! We have a *gorgeous* selection of DOSVID-19-compliant bikinis, thongs, loincloths, langots, sarongs, necklaces, bracelets, waistlets, anklets, earrings and studs, headbands, armbands, spray bottles, butt doilies—oh, and the *cutest* flip-flops

made from one-hundred-percent fair trade, ethically-sourced, USDA organic, flame-retardant materials! Spend fifty dollars, and ten-percent of your purchase will go to distributing spray bottles to needy schoolchildren in Mallomar Bay!"

I frown. "That's nice and all, but exactly how does any of this help prevent or cure actual dosequisvirus?"

Bleach-Blond Beach Chick flashes her perfectly-white, perfectly-straight smile. "Traditional clothing harbors dangerous viruses and bacteria, not to mention rogue embers, food crumbs, deadly asbestos, bed bugs, and even pesky pocket goblins! County-approved boho apparel is fine, but at Milda's, we think we can do even better by eliminating traditional clothes completely! By going boho, maintaining a healthy sheen, and practicing good social distancing habits, we can slow the spread! We're all in this together, sweetie!"

Setting the spray bottle down, I back slowly away from the booth.

We don't need social distancing.

We're already distant.

# The New Normal

**@Shaka Brah**

I guess you could call it a day in the life of a vandweller. Or the crack of dawn, if you're feeling particular. Here I am waking up in the back of *Moyo*. Here I am reaching instinctively for my phone, forgetting that even though I charged it from my travel battery last night, there's still no Internet due to the blackouts. Here I am, getting out of bed, yawning, stretching, checking my tea box, finding but a single packet of rose hips. That means today's a grocery shopping day.

Getting the tea brewing, I sling my bathroom tote over my shoulder, grab my flip-flops and towel, and go for a shower. My preference for showering is a gym or truck stop—they have nicer (albeit more expensive) bathrooms. But those are all closed these days because of the dosequisvirus epidemic. Runners-up: RV parks, campsites, beach showers. In a pinch, I've even pulled into a rest stop, connected a hose to an available spigot, and speed-showered right there in the parking lot. Not advisable, but still an option for the desperate. This morning it's a cheap, bare-bones campground at the edge of town. The outdoor showers are of dubious cleanliness. That's what the flip-flops are for, though.

I let myself into a stall and get the water running. Oh, if my family could see me now, a vandwelling boho boy lathering his unbridled locks at a pocket-change campsite. I'd never hear the end of it. But hey, this is my life, and I've chosen to live it my way. I care what others think for about as long as it takes to remind myself that I *don't*, in fact, care at all. Still...if my family could see me now.

I return to *Moyo* after, put on my shorts and various obligatory bodily adornments (gotta wear Shaka faithfully), and sit at my desk, sipping tea while poring over a printed roadmap. It's weird. I was a vandweller and Shakaist pre-DOSVID-19. I was already self-isolating and boho before the power-downs and clothing restrictions started. I already telecommuted to work. I always thought this made me better suited to acclimate to a socially-limited, tech-minimal world, and yet I'm holding my breath along with everyone else and waiting for what, if anything, will come next. And if next is more of the same, then is this the new normal? Mandatory boho? Spray bottles and sheen checks? Rolling power-ons to give the moistened masses just enough juice to charge our phones, check our e-mail, pay our bills—before immediately sending us back into the Dark Ages again? More important: I've made a life out of working to unlock SuperMegaNet's functionality, but will there even be a place for SuperMegaNet in this new normal?

The drive into town takes maybe five minutes. Surprisingly, the Spendco

parking lot is completely full, both with cars and customers. I end up finding a spot on the street half a block down and walking the difference. An enormous banner hanging above the main entrance explains all:

SPENDCO GRAND POWERING-ON!
FIRST 100 CUSTOMERS INSIDE GET A FREE TOTE BAG!

Cheesy gimmick. But here I am, one more shirtless fool standing in the long, winding line (socially distanced, of course) and maintaining his sheen while quietly praying to God there'll be bottled water, ginger and green tea, some toilet paper available by the time I get inside. On the flip-side, I'm nondescript during the wait. Not that I was ever called out more than every now and then before DOSVID-19. When people think of Blaze Masterson, they think of Josh from *Being Josh*, or Declan Chambers from *Ultrastud Returns*—definitely not the super-spiritual surfer dude from *Shaka Brah!* Only teen girls who were sexually awakened by Shaka in the nineties might know who I am, and they've all grown up and/or don't give a damn about their silly girlhood crushes nowadays. No one recognizes me, no one pays me any attention beyond smalltalk involving cookware or the origin of my crocodile tooth necklace. Which is fine with me.

I keep my eyes on the main entrance, where a projector screen and loudspeaker have been set up. It's only a few minutes before a Bert Kreischer-looking guy sporting an iPad (the store manager, I'm assuming) steps beside the screen and addresses the crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for coming out this morning to be a part of Spendco's grand powering-on!" He taps something out on his iPad; the projection screen switches to a live video feed of an old white guy in overalls and a red baseball cap standing beside an enormously-oversized circuit box. I guess you're exempt from the boho rule if you're in utilities. "This is our electrician, George. Why don't we all tell him good morning?"

The crowd yells, "Good morning, George!"

"I can't hear you!"

"*Good morning, George!*"

George waves to us, gives the store manager a thumbs-up.

"And it looks like we're good to go! Are *you* ready?"

Everyone cheers.

"I *said*, are you *ready?*"

Everyone cheers some more.

"Light us up, George!" the store manager yells, and turns to watch the projection screen along with the rest of us.

George misses his cue, gives two more thumbs up.

The store manager makes a get-on-with-it motion.

George nods, throws the first switch—

—something sparks.

A thundering explosion sounds at the rear of the store.

The video feed goes overexposed for a moment. When it returns to normal, the

crowd gasps collectively, as poor George's corpse is now cooking vigorously on the floor.

I get maybe a second or two to exchange a bewildered glance with the woman in front of me before Spendco's façade suddenly bursts into flames.

And all hell breaks loose.

The organized line I'm standing in is instantly transformed into a horrific orgy of clammy folk pushing and shoving and screaming and spray-bottling each other as they attempt to flee the inferno. I shoulder between flailing customers, climb over the hoods of cars, forward-roll between the legs of a seven-foot gentleman panicking in place and screaming at the top of his lungs, "We powered on too soon! We weren't ready! The gods are enraged!" After an eternity that's really no more than sixty seconds, I stumble out of the melee and onto the sidewalk, running like the dickens all the way down the block. When I reach my van, I yank the door open and haul myself into the driver's seat. Keys, ignition, pedal to the metal, and *Moyo* peels out and away. I catch my breath, check my reflection. My hair's mussed; there's someone else's blood smeared across my face.

And I find myself wondering...

...if the Spendco on the other side of town will have toilet paper.

## Protestration

**@jan**

**evil_ernie:** heyy hardbod i ned u
**jkounicova:** What for?
**evil_ernie:** canteen talk superimportant jus dl NOW

I check the time. Thanks to dosequisvirus, power and Internet only get turned on once a day. It's twenty minutes before today's power hour is up. Do I want to spend it with the leviathan?

**evil_ernie:** !!COME NOW!@%$

Despite the direness of his text, I highly doubt Ernie's in any serious trouble. Nevertheless, I grab my spray bottle and swipe myself to his place. Sure enough, he's his usual gas giant self, bath towel and all. Utterly ridiculous-looking, but himself.

"We're going for a walk!" he barks the instant I'm actual.

"Where?" I ask.

"All in due time!"

Geez. Do you know anyone who insists they have something important to tell you, but they don't actually tell you the important thing until after they've strung you along all day? Ernie's that guy.

"Ernie," I say, "I only have twenty minutes to upload back home."

"That's all we need!" He motions for me to follow him. We leave his bedroom, make our way down the hall and out of his grandparents' house. A five-minute walk down the block and we arrive at a strip mall where a mob of wild-eyed, shag-haired Angelicans in boho swimwear are marching around the parking lot and carrying handmade signs and megaphones.

"What's this?" I ask Ernie.

"It's a dosequisvirus march," he explains.

"I didn't know you were into activism."

"Hell yeah I am! The whole #SheenLife thing is ruining our lives and damaging the economy! Marginalizing the fat and unattractive! Glorifying the nearly-naked —while having absolutely *nothing* to do with the actual DOSVID-19 epidemic! No more! We're demonstrating for change!"

Wow. This is a whole other side of Ernie I never knew existed. Is it possible

somewhere inside all that raw cookie dough there lies a thoughtful, conscientious human being—

—hang on. The front of that T-Mobile store is missing, and people are making off with phones and tablets tucked under their arms. Following their example, the rest of the mob drops their signs and megaphones and starts bashing windows, setting fires, rushing pleading store owners.

An ill wind tousles my hair; somewhere off in the distance Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" begins to play.

I nudge Ernie in the arm. "Um...I don't think these are protesters."

"What are you jabbering about? Of course they are!"

"Why's everyone looting, then?"

Ernie pumps his fist in the air; his abdominal rolls jiggle threateningly. "To protest the city's failed dosequisvirus response and all the damage it's caused!"

We pass a naked couple banging on a pile of lottery scratchers outside a liquor store.

"Except," I point out, "it's not the swimsuits or spray bottles or rolling power-ons that are actually damaging anything, it's looters breaking and setting things on fire."

"We're all in this together!"

"So, let me get this straight. The *government* takes away your clothing—"

"Fuddruckers!"

"—and in retaliation you steal lottery scratchers from a liquor store."

"Fascists!"

"The *government* turns off your power and Internet—"

"Bastards!"

"—and so you set your neighbor's car on fire."

Ernie stops in front of a Wherefore & Pie shop, works a brick free from the flower edging beside the front door. "Exactly!"

I'm still having trouble wrapping my head around the concept. "Mayor Dude Coolson sends a hitman to your house to kill your dad. To get back at him, you kill Theo's dad."

"Now you're getting it!" Ernie faces the storefront, holds the brick above his head.

"Wait—what are you *doing*?"

"Protesting!"

I raise my spray bottle and squirt Ernie in the face.

"*Ack!*" he sputters. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"*Protesting*," I reply.

## Dogs Barking

**@ernie**

Hey, neighbor's barking dog—I get it.
You're there.
Don't give a damn.

# Impersistence

**@ernie**

What the heck, society? Rolling power-ons, spray bottles and social distancing, mandatory boho—we were supposed to be finished with this biz already! Instead, we're walking around with our shirts off, primping and preening and maintaining our sheens like a bunch of mindless waterfowl, and for what? Preventing non-existent wildfire embers and DOSVID-19 particulates from spreading? Do you know what it's like being the fat kid and having to bare rack on a daily basis? People look at me like I'm some kind of jerk who has no business going *boho*, and they're right. I *know* I have lady-tits. I *know* my rolls jiggle when I talk. I don't *want* to show them off, I *have* to. Everyone has to because we're all in this together, right?

Well, not me. Not anymore.

The instant the power's back on, I download into Theo's bedroom.

"Can this please wait?" the little bugger pleads, crouched beside his desk and plugging into the power strip an arsenal of laptops, tablets, and his phone. "I need to charge all my devices before today's power hour is up."

"This is *important*," I insist.

Theo straightens, fixes me with a concerned look. "Oh. Are you okay?"

"Skin me persistently."

"What?"

"If this is the new normal, then I want to look the part. I want a custom skin. Something sleek, athletic, sexy. Like the kid here." I palpitate one of Beta's hard drives.

Theo shrugs me off. "You want to be an Asian fitness model?"

"I don't want to *be* Beta, I want to be *like* him. I want to look good in swim trunks."

"You're fine the way you are." Theo glances at my belly, clears his throat to hide a chuckle.

"Easy for you to say! You may be small and scrawny, but at least you're an *active* small and scrawny. Me, I'm the muffin top from hell!"

Theo looks thoughtful. "Tell you what. Beat me at *Mario Kart*, and I'll install any skin you want."

That's more like it! "Any skin?"

"Sure."

"No matter how ginormous the muscles or magnificent the wang?"

"I'll make you Porn Star/Bodybuilder of the Year, if that's what floats your

boat."

"Ha! Deal, sucka!" I just so happen to be bad-ass at *Mario Kart*.

Unfortunately, as the next twenty minutes prove, Theo is even more bad-ass. He wipes the floor with me, coming in first place overall while I barely manage a distant fourth.

"Oh, look," he smirks. "I unlocked a new vehicle customization."

"You cheated!" I toss my Joy-Cons aside.

"Did not."

"Did too!"

"Not."

"I demand a re-match!"

"Nope."

"I...wait a sec—you never had any intention of getting me skinned, did you?"

"Nope."

"Why'd you even play me, then?"

Theo smiles. "For my own personal amusement."

# Boho Sunset

**@theo**

"Are we on a date?" Eva asks.

"No, of course not," I laugh nervously.

"Why are you wearing cologne, then?"

"I'm not, um, wearing cologne."

"Uh-*huh*. So, you just happen to smell fabulous?"

"I, uh, don't know what you're talking about."

Eva smirks. I'm sitting with her at the top of Voyeur Park's west-facing summit, aptly named Voyeur's Peak. She's got her camera and tripod set up, and is doing a time-lapse shot of the sun as it dips behind the San Angelico sprawl below. This is definitely *not* a date. It's...photography. That's all. So, why the heck did I put on cologne? Comb my hair? Brush my teeth? Wear my good shorts? "I'm going to shoot the sunset. Wanna come along?" That's the exact text Eva had sent me. Yet somehow it was enough to activate the slightly horny, slightly wang-associated part of my brain that's been switching on of its own accord more and more often these days whenever a cute girl talks to me—or acknowledges me in any way, shape, or form, for that matter. If Mini were here, he'd say something like, "This may not be a date, but it's not *not* a date, either." I think. I hope.

"Relax, Theo," Eva says after watching me squirm. "I'm *kidding*. The personal hygiene is strong with you is all."

Right. Of course. I knew that. "Do we have enough time to get back home before the power goes off again?"

"It's golden hour. We only need twenty minutes."

I nod, take a mental inventory of my messenger bag. The major bullet points include my phone, travel charger, various obligatory USB cables, bottle of water, a gluten-free energy bar, some breath mints, and the aforementioned cologne. If we miss our upload window, are we good to stay put here till tomorrow? We've got our spray bottles, but honestly, we haven't been maintaining our sheens. Nobody does anymore unless they're in a crowded public area, and even then it's iffy. I'm not worried about rogue embers. But being stuck at Voyeur's Peak overnight while underdressed and without a phone signal—hm. What's that thing about winter campers huddling naked together for warmth?

"So, I got reprimanded at school today," Eva says after a while.

I clear my throat. "We don't go to school anymore."

"You know what I mean."

"What happened?"

"Stupid kid called me flatbread in the chat."

"Flatbread?"

"My chest."

"Oh."

"I called him can opener."

I make a mouse-clicking motion with my finger. "F1, please."

"He's got two giant front teeth, but one is bigger and sharper than the other."

"Bonus points for you, madam." I get to my feet, bow gracefully, sit once again.

"Not really," Eva says. "The instructor said my comment was offensive, and so now my parents have to Skype with Principal Sandalwood to discuss my supposed tolerance issues."

"I mean...did he actually have big front teeth?"

"Huge."

"How can they send you to Sandalwood's office for making an observation?"

Eva shrugs. "White girl with a flat chest equals joke, Asian boy with big teeth equals life struggle, I guess."

"What does he know? Your chest looks great."

"Thanks, perv."

"I just mean—"

"Please don't explain what you *mean*." Eva thrusts an indignant palm at me—though she's smiling as she does it.

I tuck my legs against my chest, prop my head on my knees, pretend to study the sunset. Really, I'm trying to work out why I'd bristled just now. Maybe because I really *do* think Eva looks amazing, and the concept of her labeling me a perv for thinking that is...unbearable.

"When do you think this will be over?"

"Huh?"

Eva gestures at San Angelico's twinkling tapestry, the pink and orange horizon beyond. "The power-ons and spray bottles, the social distancing, these ridiculous bathing suits and 'go boho, save lives!' #SheenLife zealots—the fact that everyone nowadays begins their sentences with, 'Due to DOSVID-19...' followed by some kind of cop-out or otherwise disappointing piece of FYI."

I snicker. "'Due to DOSVID-19, all fashion sense has been banned until further notice.'"

Eva snickers back. "'Due to DOSVID-19, *Weekend at Bernie's IX* has been postponed indefinitely.'"

"'Due to DOSVID-19, the light at the end of the tunnel will only be powered on for one hour a day.'"

"'Due to DOSVID-19, homework turnarounds may be longer than usual, Mr. Korbel.'"

We laugh. Then, quieting, we happen to look each other in the eye at the same time.

"Why are you looking at me?" Eva asks.

"Why are *you* looking at *me*?" I counter, entranced, that certain switch in my brain activating again. There's something latently romantic about this moment, as if I'm seeing in Eva's eyes a spark that wasn't there before, as if she's seeing something in my eyes that's *always* been there—as if the two of us might suddenly rip off our scanty coverings and lose ourselves in a fit of burgeoning tweenage passion—

Eva's camera beeps.

I blink, shake my head.

The sun's gone.

The spark snuffed.

The moment past.

"Time lapse is done." Eva gets up, removes her camera from the tripod, and sits beside me again, flips out the viewfinder panel. "Ready?"

I nod.

We play back the sunset together.

## Weekend at Bernie's IX

**@eva**

Speaking of *Weekend at Bernie's IX*, it's kind of like watching circa-1960's *The Three Stooges*: the nostalgia's there, but you're also wondering, how long can this possibly go on?

## Cup of Dan, Please

**@ernie**

3 Hags' Doughnuts just re-opened for take-out. Hence Theo and myself spending our precious lunchtime power hour standing in a socially-distanced, sheen-maintained line for, you guessed it, doughnuts.

"It feels like forever since we were last here," Theo comments.

"That's because it *has* been forever," I reply, and glance around disappointedly at the place. The once-cozy gingerbread house patio with its handcrafted wooden chairs and colorful umbrellas of whimsy has been converted into a winding queue roped off and marked by multiple signs telling everyone to, "Please keep six feet apart. Customers must practice boho, and must maintain a proper sheen at all times. Spray bottle required to enter. Card only." It's not a total bust, though. You know those bleach-blond Mallomar Bay chicks with the perfect bodies and brilliant smiles who titter around beachfront bakeries or ice cream shops simply looking good, but who never actually *buy* anything? There are a handful of them here today doing their thing in their usual skimpy string bikinis, and are seemingly no more aware of their utterly excessive sexiness now than they were before.

But *I'm* aware.

"Hey, junior," I tell Theo. "Let's take a selfie." I put my arm around his shoulders, swivel him around so that our backs are facing the bikini chicks.

"Dude, social distancing," Theo replies, and starts to squirm free.

I hold him tight, grab his arm, palm the back of his hand, lifting it up so that he can aim his phone at our ugly mugs. "Relax. It's not like we're making out or anything."

"But—"

"Just take the damned picture!"

With hostage-like enthusiasm, Theo wakes his camera, frames the two of us following the rule of thirds, snaps a pic.

I tilt the camera up, bringing more of the lovely ladies into view. "Take another, please."

Theo starts to recompose—

I tilt the camera back up again, tap the shutter button.

Theo frowns, reviews the shot. The bikini chicks fill the frame, while me and Theo are merely floating heads at the very bottom. "Ernie, that's *terrible* composition..." Then it hits him who the *true* subjects of the photo are, and he shakes his head, glowers at me, taps the delete icon. "When are you going to get

your own phone?"

"The very moment my dusty, outdated grandparents finally kick it."

Quickly enough, we make it to the front of the line, where the greeter sprays us down, waves us inside.

"Cup of Joe, please," the guy ahead of us tells the cashier.

I glare at him while saying to Theo, "That's dumb."

"Huh?"

"'Cup of Joe.' Why do people call coffee that? Did some guy named Joe invent coffee? Is 'Joe' German for coffee? Does this guy have a speech impediment and meant to say 'java?'"

Theo scowls, resumes his assessment of the gluten-free options. "I'll ponder that while you order."

I continue to glare at the cup of Joe guy. When it's my turn to order, I step up to the register and say, loudly, "Chocolate Schnauzer and a cup of *Dan*, please."

"Excuse me?" asks the cashier.

Now making direct eye contact with the cup of Joe guy: "If we're going to arbitrarily assign first names to beverages, then I'm going to call my hot chocolate 'Dan.'"

# The Night We Became Honey Banana

**@adult-theo**

Our future college-age selves are driving home from yet another lousy gig when Jan, heretofore passed out on his drums in the back of Ernie's van, lifts his head and murmurs, "That guy was right, you know."

"What guy?" I ask.

"The one who stood up at the end of our set," Eva answers, sighing, "and shouted that we'd ruined his evening."

Oh. *That* guy.

Ernie glares at me from behind the wheel, adjusts one of the combs in his fatfro. "I *told* you keyboards have no place in rock music."

"Hey, my keyboards are our *secret weapon*," I retort.

"Shut up, the both of you." Eva shakes her head. "I'm in no mood to spend the ride home listening to the bass player argue with the keyboard player over who's more expendable."

"I can tell you right now who's more *expandable*—"

Ernie swerves on purpose, attempting to throw me from the passenger seat. "That's it! I'm rolling us into a ditch!"

Unconcerned, Eva says, "Have fun with that. Meanwhile, anyone have any ideas about saving our band from certain demise?"

"Simples. We change our name again."

"Ernie, every week we have a bad show, and every week we change the band name."

"That's what you *do* when you're starting out, keep changing your name until your first hit single. *Duh.*"

"What if we don't have our first hit single until 2050?" I ask.

Ernie scowls. "I'll be dead by then, God willing."

"Hm. We could call ourselves Dead in Twenty."

"Pocket Sock."

"Already a thing."

"No way."

"Yep. Saw them at Meanie's last month."

Jan calls out from the back: "What about Suga Luga?"

"What the shaft does that even mean?" Ernie asks.

I look up the name on my phone. "Also already a thing."

"TBA, then. As in 'to be announced.' People will see a band list and think our

slot has yet to be announced—but that *is* our name. To Be Announced."

Eva frowns. "I like it. I'm just not *in* like with it."

"The Impending Death of the Virgin Spirit," I offer (I've secretly always dreamed of being in a band named after a Will Ackerman song).

"Nay. We need to keep it simple. Memorable. Nondescript, but also cute. Like, we're good enough, *confident* enough that we don't care if our name sounds ridiculous. Honey Banana or something."

Ernie's eyes go wide. "Dudes...we...are..."

"...*Honey Banana!*" I finish, high-fiving him.

"*Ugh*," Eva moans. "That's it—I quit."

I glance over my shoulder at her. "You say that every week."

"Seriously, Ernie, unlock the back door. I'm jumping out right now."

Jan leans across his drum kit, puts a hand on Eva's shoulder. "Be patient. It's only for a week."

## Bohemianology

**@theo**

I suspected San Angelico's Boho Mandate had become the new normal when I noticed everyone's gradual transitioning from disposable surgical shorts and bikinis to designer boho ones—which has led to Ernie, Eva, Jan, and myself texting each other stupid online quiz results such as these:

***Bohemianology***
**What does your choice of swimwear say about you?**

**Theo—*Classic Board Shorts*.** You're the down-to-Earth, no-nonsense type who appreciates the tried-and-true approach when it comes to mandated swimwear. Neat, orderly, and oftentimes analytical to a fault, boho is your way of getting in touch with your primordial side—and you don't need to put out in order to do it. Cool and casual wins the race, bruh.

**Ernie—*Dulce & Chobani*.** Your fashion sense isn't just incredible, it's *edible*. The bath towel look turns you on. You're the kind of discerning gentleman who wants to have his cake and eat it, too. A voracious party animal, your motto is, "Sleep is for the dead!" Food and drink are your besties. If it's not edible, you're not interested. You're not fat, you're big-boned.

**Jan—*Standard Surgical Speedo*.** You're still sporting the baby-blue disposable surgical Speedo that fashion forgot the very same day the Boho Mandate kicked in. You don't care what others think. You've never been trendy before, and you sure as hell aren't going to start now. Frugal to a fault, you pinch your pennies so hard there are actual calluses on your fingertips.

**Eva—*Milda's of Portland*.** You're a straightforward one-piece kind of girl. Not much of a natural beauty, your secret weapon during the Mandate is more color with fewer clothes. For you, boho is a functionality thing, but you also have a latent hedonistic streak that aches to be set free every time you see a "Go boho, save lives!" tote bag. It's always the quiet ones.

Huh.

I open a new browser tab on my phone, tap out the URL for Milda's.

Mini, who'd been sitting on my knee and watching me and the gang share our Bohemianology results, raises a plush eyebrow and asks, "What are you doing?"

"Getting Eva a tote bag for her birthday," I reply.

"Um…yeah. A pre-Daphne Niles Crane just called. He'd like a cut of your jib."

# The Complete Life Cycle of a Social Media Interaction: Case Study in Two Sentences

**@thornton_milburrough**

Follow.
Unfollow.

# Movie Night

**@theo**

You haven't experienced the post-apocalyptic genius that is *Turbo Kid* until you've seen it at the drive-in from the back of your dad's Prius on a sweltering summer's night. Yeah, we're parked at the very rear of the lot, and yeah, the humidity made us sweaty and disgusting the very instant we turned off the car and rolled down the windows, but on the bright side, perspiring profusely means we don't have to waste time maintaining our sheens. And at least I'm out and actually *doing* something on a Saturday night.

"This movie was terrible when it was on Netflix, and it's terrible now," Ernie grunts. The evening's self-proclaimed/exclaimed "Soundmaster," he shifts Dad's boombox (tuned to Kaufman Drive-In's FM station) on his lap, adjusts his bath towel. "Why are we even here?"

"Do you mean here at the drive-in," I murmur, "or life in general?"

"The drive-in, brainiac."

"I told you I'd never been to a drive-in movie theater before, and that my dad was taking me, and you begged to come along."

"Bruh, I didn't *beg*."

"Uh-*huh*."

"Seriously. This movie sucks."

"We're only five minutes in."

"Five minutes is all a real man needs to tell if a movie's good or not."

I think for a sec. "Even a Quentin Tarantino movie?"

"Just because his opening scenes are thirty minutes long doesn't mean he's exempt."

"Dude, you've grown pessimistic in your old age."

"Get off my lawn, junior."

Dad, reclined in the driver's seat, and evidently enjoying the movie more than I'd expected, raises his hand and says, "Hey, boys. Voices down, volume up, please."

Ernie frowns, looks like he wants to flick him off—

"*Ernie*," I hiss.

—turns up the boombox a notch.

# Movie Night II

**@theo**

Le Matos' epic synths thunder in my ears as the Kid bikes to Bagu's bar, and I'm thinking to myself, how could anyone *not* like *Turbo Kid*? How could anyone *not* be thrilled by the novelty of Kaufman's crowdsourcing a bunch of Tesla batteries to power up their drive-in for ninety minutes every weekend? I gaze out the passenger window. A grid of neatly-organized, new-normaled, socially-distanced cars stretches into the night. It's inspiring at first. Not so much when, from what I can make out through their rapidly-fogging-up windows (which shouldn't be possible in this weather), I realize the couple in the car next to us aren't even watching the movie, but are instead going at each other like there's no tomorrow, shorts and bikinis abandoned, limbs flailing, lips smacking, car rocking to a certain, steady rhythm, and oh, crap, are they doing what I think they're doing?

Someone bangs on Dad's door—the carhop gal who'd taken our order earlier has returned with our food. "Okay," she announces loudly and nasally, "I got three large popcorns, two vegan sweet potato nachos, two bottles of water, and a family-sized Diet Dr. Pepper."

"That's us," Dad acknowledges, and passes one of the nachos and a water to me, the popcorn and Dr. Pepper to Ernie.

"There you go, kids," the carhop gal coos. "It's gonna be a hell of a show!" She disappears into the night.

"Finally, something to eat!" Ernie pops the lid off one of his cartons—

—holy crud.

His popcorn's glowing.

# Movie Night III

**@theo**

More specifically, there's a hearty layer of neon goo drizzled over the top. It casts an eerie sheen on Ernie's face, across the back of Dad's seat.

He holds out the carton for me to see. "What the hell is this?"

"Some kind of gimmick?" I reply, shrugging. I open my nacho box.

There's a severed finger in my sweet potatoes.

And a cigar butt.

And everything's swimming in neon goo.

Ernie sniffs his popcorn, makes a face. "*Blarg*. It smells like Clorox and belly button." He shoots me a questioning look. "Should we eat it?"

I glare at him. "Yeah, we should *totally* eat the food that's glowing and has a severed finger and a cigar butt in it." I grab the popcorn out of his hand, lean forward, tap Dad's shoulder. "Hey, Dad. Our food is...weird."

"Theo's has a finger in it!" Ernie adds. "And cigars!"

I hold up my nachos for Dad to see.

He frowns, checks his own fare. The tell-tale neon glow lights up his face. He says, "Freaking Kaufman's!" and closes the box, gets out of the car. He beckons for me and Ernie to hand over our food.

Ernie hesitates. "Wait, maybe they're not all like that..." He opens the remaining popcorn cartons, finds a number-two pencil in one, a bronze medal in the other. Neon goo for days.

Needless to say, he turns everything over to Dad, who nods and, armed with our tainted vittles, tells us, "Close the door. I'll be back." He leaves the car.

## Movie Night IV

**@theo**

Ernie dumps the boombox onto my lap and gets out, slams the driver's door shut. But instead of returning to the back seat, he starts after Dad.

"Wait—where are you going?" I ask, clambering out as well.

"To watch your pops chew out the Kaufman folks," Ernie replies.

I grab my spray bottle and run after him. Together we navigate between the other cars, trying to find Dad, but he's already lost to the shadows. I can see the concession stand glowing indistinctly in the impossible distance, though. Worst case, we simply make our way there and meet up, right?

There's a nervous energy in the air. Uncertain figures lurch to and fro in the flickering light of the projection screen. In fact, there are probably more people out of their cars than in, stumbling around, taking selfies, chasing after each other, making out. I swear that's neon goo blotting their lips, speckling their hair, dribbling down their torsos. Like, I think people have been *eating* the neon goo, and it's making them drunk or something.

We pass this one car rocking back and forth vigorously, its fogged-up windows flashing blue and red like there's some kind of retro disco going on inside. Somewhere nearby I hear a laugh and a snarl, and a sound like sloppy chewing.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," I whisper, stepping close beside Ernie and aiming my spray bottle defensively.

He disregards me with a wave of his hand, goes up to the retro disco car and presses his face to the driver's side window in an attempt to get a peek inside. "You have a bad feeling about everything—holy Hatfield! I see titties!"

"Great. Can we go now?"

Ernie shoves me back. "*In a sec!*"

I pay a nervous glance to my left, my right, down at the asphalt. A thin layer of fog is seeping between my toes, shrouding my feet.

"Geez!" Ernie whispers, his face very nearly fused with the glass of the window at this point. "You think they're eating each other out, or just plain *eating* each other?"

I look up. The sky's become a Technicolor nightmare. "Ernie, we should go..." Spray bottle at the ready, I start to reach for him again—

—and suddenly the car door flies open, knocking him backward.

# Movie Night V

**@theo**

Ernie collides with me, and I try to catch him, steady him on his feet, but his momentum ends up taking us both down. We land on the ground with an audible *thud!*

Roll onto our hands and knees.

Eyes locked on the front seat of the disco car...

...where this totally naked dude with a grotesquely-proportioned undercarriage is extricating himself from his totally naked and totally dead girlfriend who's totally covered in neon goo and who's totally missing large chunks of her skin.

"Crud on a stick," Ernie breathes. "Is that dude *eating* his girlfriend?"

The neon goo cannibal dude steps out of the car and glowers at us, and suddenly I hear myself thinking that all this time we've had rogue embers and dosequisvirus on our minds when it's neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dudes we should've been worried about.

Ernie grabs me.

I grab him back.

Nuts to how gay we undoubtedly look.

"I've seen this before," Ernie whimpers.

"Where?" I whimper back.

"*Killerama*. 2011 horror film that's even worse than *Turbo Kid*—"

"Never mind the critical review! What do we *do*?"

"No clue. I never saw the ending. I *do* know one thing, though..."

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude licks his lips, smiles deviously at us.

"...this sure would be the perfect time for a cliffhanger."

# Sheen Life

**@jan**

I could be watching *Turbo Kid* with Theo and Ernie right now, but instead I'm doing a C2C with Uncle Martin at that Kaedo Cafe down the street from my parents' apartment.

"I'm finally getting my act together!" he explains as we choose a table near the edge of the Kaedo parking lot (everything's outdoor seating these days, thanks to DOSVID). "With the economy what it is, it's no wonder I haven't been able to find traditional work!" He sets down his carry bag and spray bottle, settles into his chair. "Dosequisvirus may have gotten the masses laid off, but self-made men like you and me, we're the new entrepreneurs, forging our own path, making our own fortunes!"

I sigh and take a seat. Have you ever heard of the Kounicova Curse? My friends think it's just me and Mom and Dad who're broke all the time, but the Curse extends to the rest of my family as well, Uncle Martin included. I can't say exactly why, except that every one of us has run (or tried to run) a failed or failing business. A Kounicova can get hired to sweep floors or clean up vomit for a belligerent swing manager like nobody's business, but if we try to strike out on our own, we can't seem to get the customers, sell the product, or make any profit at all, really.

That doesn't mean we don't still try. Uncle Martin's plan to end the Kounicova Curse? Buying junk and re-selling it on Flipitty for twice the price. Tonight's piece: a DSLR camera he found at the swap meet. I helped him set up the Flipitty page for it. We're here to meet up with the buyer. Well, *he's* here to meet up with the buyer. I'm here for a Zef Burger. Or maybe a Monkey Shake or Triple Taco platter. I haven't decided.

Uncle Martin raises his hand and snaps his finger loudly. "Service!"

I grab his arm, lower it beneath the tabletop. "Um, they don't do it like that here. You're supposed to order at the register, and they serve you at the side door." I point.

"Ah. Dosequisvirus, eh?" Uncle Martin nods, pulls two five-dollar bills and a handful of ones from his waist pouch, hands them to me. "Fetch me a coffee, neat, my boy, and whatever catches your fancy!"

Cash in hand, I leave the table, work my way across the parking lot, the patio lights strung above a twinkling canopy sparkling against the night. I wonder how much Kaedo's evening power hours cost.

Inside the cafe, the register guy seems put off by my disposable surgical Speedo.

He's looking at me the same way he probably looks at homeless dudes when they ask to use the toilet. "Welcome to Kaedo Cafe. What can I get for you?"

"Pigsies in a Blanket and a coffee, neat," I reply.

"Pigsies and a coffee, er...what now?"

That's right—Uncle Martin's oldschool Czech, so I'll have to translate. "Black coffee in a small ceramic cup served on a saucer." I think.

The register guy still looks confused. "I'll, uh, see what I can do." He rings me up, hands me my change and a receipt. I head back out and around to the side of the cafe, where the line for the pickup window is. Ignoring the bikini babe ahead of me as best as I can (why is it always the fit ones who choose the Boho Mandate's skimpiest options?), I take out my phone, check my SuperMegaNet feed. There's a text from Eva telling me to have a good night. More interesting, though, is Theo's feed, in which Ernie, tears and snot streaming down his face, is vlogging *The Blair Witch Project* style. In the background, Theo frantically waves his spray bottle back and forth at some kind of weird glowing naked dude.

"Being attacked by neon goo rape zombies!" Ernie bawls into the camera. "And it's all Theo's fault! Little bugger made me watch this stupid movie with him, and now we're going to die because of it! I love you Gramps, Grams! I'm so scared—somebody please freaking call Bruce Campbell!"

"Very funny, leviathan," I say, and shake my head.

"Wait, food stamps, is that you—?"

I lower the volume on my phone, clip it back onto my waist.

Try my best to pretend I'm not totally staring at the bikini babe's epic behind.

Eventually, I reach the pickup window. I take my tray from the server, and am only mildly surprised that Uncle Martin's coffee sits proudly in a Styrofoam cup set on a napkin.

It'll have to do.

When I get back to our table, there's this tweaky-looking hippie dude in dreads and a tattered sarong sitting across from Uncle Martin—our Flipitty buyer, I'm guessing. I pull up a third chair, sit, slide Uncle Martin's coffee toward him.

"Five-hundred, final offer," he says to the dreadlocks hippie dude, and frowns at the Styrofoam. "So, do we have a deal, friend?"

I pop a Pigsy into my mouth—

—and that's when the hippie pulls a small handgun from under his sarong and aims it subtly at Uncle Martin. "Don't make a scene, *friend*—"

Which is exactly what Uncle Martin does, dropping his coffee and throwing his hands over his head. "*Aaaagh!* He's got a gun!"

I freeze in mid-bite, and what happens next...well, I think the hippie's plan was to exploit the fact that we're sitting so close to the street and simply take the camera, make a quick, inconspicuous exit. And he kind of sort of does, minus the inconspicuous part. He grabs the camera, shoves his chair back, and jumps to his feet—losing his sarong in the process.

The people next to us gasp.

A woman at the other end of the parking lot screams.

Uncle Martin's spilled coffee splashes loudly onto the asphalt below.

And you can see the *oh, crap!* in the hippie's eyes as he starts hopping around trying to use one of his feet to somehow dislodge the sarong from his chair and kick it up into his arms. Instead, he stubs his toe while knocking the chair over, accidentally fires his gun into the ground, drops the camera, bangs his head on the tabletop while bending over to pick it up again, and generally makes a spectacle of himself.

Long story short, to anyone near the corner of Main and Culver at about eight-thirty this evening, that's why there's a naked guy with a gun and a busted camera running awkwardly down the street.

# Intermission

**@theo**

Okay, so taunting the neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude with my spray bottle isn't working. Nor is Ernie's clinging to me like some kind of giant bath-toweled blob. "*Dude*," I say, and start to push him away—

"*Okayfineiwishihad BestTail!"* he blurts, squeezing my hand so hard it hurts.

I blink. "Huh?"

"*All I got is raw cookie dough screw you for winning Best Tail without even trying there I said it!"*

"Okay, technically Cameron Beaumont won the award, and said award was given to him by Robbie the Friendly Friggin' Pervert, and can we *not* talk about this right now—?"

"Cut!" yells the director.

Wait—there's a director?

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude straightens, spreads his arms as he glares past me and Ernie. "What is it this time?"

"Our fault—lighting issue. Take five, everyone."

I look at Ernie. He looks at me. Still holding each other, we rotate in place to find that we're standing on a cheesy movie set from the 1950s. Cast and crew are adjusting lights, repositioning microphones, fiddling with fog machines. A pair of DPs are changing film reels on cameras placed off to one side, where a frazzle-haired director goes over scene notes with his assistant. Kaufman's Drive-In is still here, it's just a painted backdrop now.

"What the skank is happening?" Ernie rasps.

"I have no clue," I reply. "I think we're dead or something."

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude walks casually over to us, cell phone in hand. (On closer inspection, it would appear he's not, in fact, naked, but is wearing flesh-colored briefs with a giant plastic appendage attached). "Can you believe there's actually a *Bill and Ted Face the Music*?"

A makeup gal appears out of nowhere and starts dabbing at my face, teasing my hair. Ernie's, too. "Um...huh?"

"Reboots gone wild." The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude holds out his phone for us to see. "As if *TMNT* and *Picard* weren't bad enough, now there's *Bill and Ted*."

"It could be worse," the makeup gal says.

"What could be worse than *Picard*?"

"*Billion Dollar Baby.*"
"*No, Trillion Dollar Baby.*"
"*Admiral Kane.*"
"*Psychos*. You know, like how they re-did *Predators* in 2010."
"*The Lost Men.*"
"*Weekend at Bernie's IX.*"
"*The Greater Outdoors.*"
"*Uber Driver*. Completely CGI Robert De Niro."
"*One More Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.*"
"*Another Tango in Paris.*"
"*Dances With Wolves Again.*"
"*Greatfellas.*"
"*12 Angry Women.*"
"*The Darker Knight.*"
"*The Darkest Knight.*"
"*Madder Max.*"
"*Even Madder Max.*"
"*Maddest Max: Ultimate Max.*"

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude looks thoughtful. "Is there a job where you just sit around all day inventing movie titles for cheesy Hollywood sequels and/or reboots? Because we'd be *killer* at it."

## Movie Night VI: The Final Scene

**@theo**

"Okay, places, everyone!" yells the director.

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude puts his phone away, nods at me and Ernie with a wink and a smile. "Y'all are doing great, kiddos. Let's make 'em proud." He returns to the car and shakes out his arms, wiggles his crotch, checks his half-eaten girlfriend—a latex dummy, I now realize—gives us a thumbs up.

"Lights! Camera! Action!"

The scene resumes.

The neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude immediately transforms from man to monster.

And Ernie's hugging me all over again.

I want to do the same, to hug him back and give in to the terror and utter confusion—to give the director exactly what he wants. But I know better. This is just a set, it's *always* been just a set, and the neon goo drive-in theater cannibal dude is just an actor wearing makeup. I don't have to be afraid of him is the point. *Because I know better.* It's like that dream where you're still in the fourth grade even though you were promoted more than two years ago. You keep going back, you keep missing the bus or forgetting your locker combination or failing the big quiz, and you feel like this has been your whole life stuck and going nowhere over and over—and then one dream you catch yourself, you remember that you've already finished the fourth grade, you're out, you're done, you don't have to keep going back to your old elementary school. I don't have to keep coming back here, either. I'm not talking about the drive-in theater or the movie set scenario concocted by my uppity brain. What I mean is the place I've been coming back to that's inside of me, but doesn't need to be. The place where I worry and fret and shiver and shake, unable to control outcomes that are totally mine to control.

I've already been here.

I've already done this.

I don't need to do it anymore.

One of the stagehands seems to be on my side, because he's aiming an industrial fan in my direction, the breeze ruffling my shorts, bouncing my Dragon Ball, tousling my hair. I stand straight, unafraid as I heft my spray bottle and raise it above my head, in effect becoming a living art rendition of that Boris Vallejo movie poster for *National Lampoon's Vacation*. Only instead of Beverly D'Angelo clinging to my leg, it's poor Ernie—

"Cut—*cut!*" yells the director into his megaphone. He gets to his feet, kicks over his chair, jabs a knobby finger squarely in my direction. "Goddamnit, Ivanovich! What do you think you're doing? That's not the scene!"

I stand my ground. "It is now."

"*What did you just say to me?*"

"I'm quitting," I reply, and help Ernie get to his feet. "I'm done." Together we start walking away.

The director's livid. "Don't you walk away from me! Get back here this instant! You walk out on me and I'll send your butt back to doing breakfast cereal commercials for the rest of your life! You'll never work in this town again, you hear me, Ivanovich? *RKO owns your ass!*"

I hear him, but I'm not listening as I step from fake turf to regular old summer-warmed asphalt.

The stage lights dim.

The scene fades.

I'm back in reality—or maybe I never left.

"What the hell was that?" Ernie breathes, finally letting go and fixing me with an incredulous, somewhat accusing stare.

I look over my shoulder, smiling. "Nothing to worry about."

Back at the car, Dad's already returned with replacement snacks, which he passes to us as we pile into the back seat. "Concessions apologized for the fake promotional goo and condiments, crossed our order with someone else's. Decided to comp us. Where were you two, by the way?"

I exchange glances with Ernie.

Shrugging, I reply, "That carhop was right. It's been a heck of a show."

# A Modern-Day Christmas Story

**@theo**

It's the middle of the night, Christmas Eve, and Ernie's standing over my bed, one hand holding up his bath towel, the other poking one of my nipples repeatedly. "Hey, junior. Wake up."

I push him away, rubbing my eyes and blinking in the light of my cell phone's touchscreen. "What time is it?"

"I think I killed a man."

"Huh?"

"*I think I killed a man."*

It takes a moment (and a few more dodged nipple-pokes) for it to sink in: Ernie's serious. Well, as serious as you can be while wearing nothing but a towel—is that blood splatter on his face and shoulder? "Um...okay."

"I'm cereal, dude. I killed him."

"That's great."

"*Dead*, bruh."

"Uh-huh. Can I go back to sleep now?"

Ernie frowns, frustrated. "I just told you I killed someone, and *that's* your reaction?"

"You're lucky you got a reaction from me at all."

"Well, it was an underwhelming reaction."

"No refunds. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Ernie bites his lip, thinks for a sec. "Just...come look and tell me I didn't do what I think I did."

I roll onto my side, facing away from him. "Merry Christmas, Ernie."

"What are you doing?"

"Going back to sleep."

"I'll keep flicking your nipples, then—"

I clamp my hands over my chest.

"—and blowing into your ear—"

Toss my head to and fro.

"—I'll slow-wedgie your boxers so tight not even George Noory himself will be able to save your prostate—"

"Fine, *fine!*" I throw back the covers, jump out of bed. "What is *so* important that you have to show me right now this very instant?"

Ernie nods at my phone.

Sighing, I pick it up, swipe us into his bedroom. He solemnly leads me out, down the hall, and into the living room. He points at the fireplace and...it's not so dark that I can't actually *see* what's in there (there's a flashlight propped on the coffee table). No, it's that I can't *believe* what's in there: a pair of very Santa-like legs —bright red pants, black boots, iron fire stoker jammed into the bloodied crotch— dangling limply above the hearth.

"What the heck happened here?" I ask, swallowing hard.

"I heard a noise on the roof," Ernie explains. "Since my grandparents apparently won't wake up for anything less than an overturned blowhorn truck, I took it upon myself to investigate, and what do I find but this jerk trying to wriggle his way down our chimney!"

"So, you stabbed him in the crotch?"

"I had to think quick!"

I squat beside the coffee table and try to peer further up inside the chimney. "Ernie, you killed Santa Claus."

"Okay, junior. This is San Angelico in the twenty-twenties, and not some kind of children's picture book. This is also *not* Santa Claus. Even if he was, in what world is it *ever* okay for a grown man to break into people's homes in the middle of the night supposedly delivering *presents* for little boys and girls who've been *good* all year?" Ernie affects an air of importance. "If you ask me, I just stopped a gross, disgusting shopping mall predator from dropping his next Yuletide log into the unsuspecting mouth of...of..." He trails off, listening. "Are those...sleigh bells?"

Without a word, we stumble from the living room, dart outside and onto the front lawn. It's cold, but it's California-cold, so my shorts (and Ernie's towel) aren't entirely inadequate. We crane our necks, looking up into the clear night sky...and I can tell you with absolute certainty that nine festive reindeer and a colorful sleigh are hovering motionless above the Womacks' house.

"Holy hell!" Ernie gasps.

I just hold myself and gawk. "Dude, you definitely killed Santa Claus."

"*Or* a flaky mall Santa—"

"—who can afford flying reindeer pulling a magic sleigh."

"Damn." Ernie falters. "You know what this means?"

"That you're going to prison for manslaughter?"

"No. I'm not getting any presents this year."

I shake my head. "You were never going to get any presents."

"Shut up and help me dispose of the body."

# 2020 Vision

**@theo**

"Where the heck did 2020 go?" Ernie asks at a quarter to midnight, his fat face filling my phone's touchscreen.

I've been dozing unsuccessfully with the TV on, waiting for the Other Shoe to drop (New York has the ball; San Angelico has a giant inflatable shoe), but now I sit up in bed, picking up my phone, rubbing my face, ruffling my hair. "Forget 2020—where did *today* go?"

"It literally feels like just yesterday I was fully-clothed and dry."

"But somehow it's also like we've been twelve-going-on-thirteen since August 6, 2008."

Ernie looks thoughtful. "Right? Shouldn't we all be in our twenties and boning hella babes by now?"

"Somehow I don't think Eva would be into that."

"You know what I mean."

"If you say so." I yawn.

"Would you believe I found another pubic hair today?"

"TMI, dude."

"One day smooth as a cue ball, the next I've got Velcro crotch. Man, it's all downhill from here. Shaving, acne pads, industrial-strength deodorant..." Ernie shakes his head. "The *frick* is up with time passing so quickly? I feel like Julian Glover drinking from the wrong cup at the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*." Doing an exaggerated impression, he screams, "*What...is...happening to me?!*"

"You're getting old, Matrix," I laugh. "You're getting old."

Ernie talks some more about pubic hair and puberty in general. I just kind of zone out, staring at the TV and watching a live night shot of downtown. The city's set up a two-hundred-foot-tall shaft with the Other Shoe, its sparkling finish foot-lit and gleaming beacon-like, sitting suspended at the very top. Despite the cold, a senselessly large crowd of swimsuited and spray-bottled citizens is milling around the base of the shaft. Every so often the camera cuts to various closeups of people making fish lips, dropping peace signs, or flashing their boobs. Eventually, eleven-fifty-nine rolls around, and I turn up the volume on the TV as the countdown begins. At ten seconds till midnight, the Shoe begins its descent. But instead of merely dropping, it bursts into flame about a third of the way down—and then plummets into the shrieking masses below.

Ernie sighs. “Flippin’ 2020.”
“Flippin’ 2020,” I agree.

# An Unlikely Superpower

**@jan**

"So, I have superpowers now," Ernie announces on downloading to our usual table outside 3 Hags' Doughnuts.

Theo and I exchange curious glances.

"You'll forgive me if I don't suspend my disbelief, fat boy," Eva says.

Ernie sits, glares at her, adjusts his bath towel. "No, really. I have superpowers."

"Do tell."

"Apparently, I can go undisturbed for a whole afternoon holed up in my bedroom doing anything from homework to *Hella War*, and my grandparents will treat me like I don't exist. But the very instant I whip out my junk for a little hand-love—*bam!* There's my grams asking about school assignments, dirty laundry, shower time, breakfast, lunch, dinner. It doesn't matter where she is, near or far. If I'm taunting the tiger, she'll somehow walk in on me."

"Isn't your grandma a cardboard cutout ever since Theo defeated her?" I ask.

(Out of the corner of my eye, I see Theo dipping his head ever so slightly.)

"Yeah," Ernie answers, "but she can still be annoying as all get-out."

I shake my head. "You don't have superpowers. You masturbate too much, and so the likelihood of your *babička* catching you is statistically increased."

"My *babička*, to use your primitive old-world tongue, doesn't *catch* me, she's summoned by unholy forces every single time I decide to get intimate with myself."

"Is not," Theo says.

"Is too!" Ernie retorts.

"Not."

"Too!"

"*Not.*"

"*Too!*" Ernie reaches provocatively inside his bath towel—and I'll be darned if Mrs. Womack isn't suddenly propped beside him.

"Ernest, did you finish your—*oh!!*" she gasps, and her flat, cardboard frame topples over, lies motionless on the ground.

Ernie jabs a finger at her. "See? *See?*"

"Okay..." Eva says slowly. "That was gross and disgusting and more than a little weird. But it's not a superpower, it's just...coincidence."

"Then how come it happens *every* time I wank?"

"Maybe because you wank *all* the time," Theo suggests with a smirk.

Ernie narrows his eyes at each of us in turn. "Why do I even come to you with

my problems?"

Eva says, "Obviously because we're paying off some bad karma earned in a previous life."

## Getting Dressed

**@mark**

It's the middle of the night, and yeah, Wonder, Hamilton, and myself are out past curfew. The posh Mallomar Heights estate across that sprawling, impeccable lawn there? That's Oakland Warner's place. He's the douchebag team captain who led the Mallomar Influencers to victory against Boca Linda during our last pre-DOSVID match. We were always looking forward to redeeming ourselves on the mat, but since wrestling's been all but outlawed thanks to the dosequisvirus epidemic, we've had to find other more creative ways to exact our revenge.

"Ready?" Wonder asks.

Me and Hamilton nod, quietly open our backpacks and swap out our swim trunks for designer jeans, hoodies, sneakers, everything styling and ultra-flammable. Then, when the coast is clear, and without so much as a single squirt from our spray bottles, we file out of Wonder's Jeep Wrangler, rolls of Charmful Quadruple-Ply Outré Soft toilet paper in hand.

We begin the work.

Tossing.

Throwing.

Hurling.

Free-spirited and fully-clothed.

And I can't help but think, in yesterday's world, we would've gotten *un*dressed to be provocative.

Today, we're getting dressed.

# A Simple Thesis Regarding the Origin of Affluence

**@thornton_milburrough**

The question becomes, then: is affluence the result of dissatisfaction, or is dissatisfaction the result of affluence?

# Earfart

**@eva**

"How come boys fart more than girls?" Ernie asks me one afternoon while we're waiting for Theo and Jan to download outside of the Kawaii Cup near my place.

"Girls fart just as much," I reply. "We only hold them in more often."

"You can't hold in a fart."

"Can too."

"We're talking toxic, explosive, highly-flammable gasses." Ernie throws up his arms. "Just because you hold them in doesn't mean they don't still go *somewhere!*"

"Do you want to know where farts go when you hold them in?"

"Please, enlighten me."

"Out another orifice," I say, joking.

Ernie blinks, does a total deadpan. "Are you serious?"

I'm about to tell him no, of course I'm not serious when I feel a stray wisp of hair flutter beside my left ear. I know it's the breeze, I know it's mere coincidence, but—

"Did you just fart out of your ear?" Ernie asks incredulously.

I scowl at him. "Yes, Ernie. I've been holding in my farts since breakfast, and now they're starting to seep out through my nose and ears. Happy?"

Ernie studies my ear intently. "Does it hurt?"

"Ernie—"

"*Ew*, does it *smell?*"

I swish my hand above his head. "Sarcasm lost."

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**@selfpublishedauthor**

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## Gray Square

**@jan**

For whatever reason, Eva, Ernie, Theo, and myself have uploaded to an online art gallery, and are currently staring at this:

Other art aficionados murmur in hushed tones, nodding at this, pointing at that.

"What's this supposed to be again?" I ask.

"Abstract minimalism," Theo replies.

"I just see a gray square with a black notch at the top."

Ernie snorts, adjusts his bath towel. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"What do *you* see, leviathan?"

"Dong."

"Why doesn't *that* surprise me?"

"*Har-har.*"

I stare at the square again, but it doesn't make anymore sense now than it did five minutes ago. Eva had seemed excited when she'd invited us to join her on the server for the exhibition, but I guess I just don't get art. From the looks on their faces, Theo and Ernie don't get it either.

The adults standing nearby seem to get it, though:

"The square is neither black nor white, but somewhere in between. It's a lack of extremes, a compromise. Balance."

"What does the notch represent?"

"Imperfection."

"Scale."

"Solitude."

"Social commentary. The notch represents oppression, marginalization—black and white minority struggling to keep from being diluted by a vast sea of gray."

"How are you seeing that?"

"How are you *not* seeing that?"

"No, no. The square itself is extraneous. It's the act of *observing* the square, that's the actual art. The plain white backdrop of the server is the canvas. We're the living scene painted in flesh and bone. Take these Shakaist children, for example. They provide a dialog between strict lines, modern rigidity—the *square*, if you will—and the wild, the untamed, the organic. They symbolize a transference between opposing ideals."

Ernie turns to Eva and scowls. "Is this what art appreciation is all about? People standing around staring at a gray square and making stuff up?"

"Art is subjective," Eva replies with a shrug.

"You don't know what the square means either, do you?"

"Not a clue."

# That Time I Was Drummer For Honey Banana

**@adult-jan**

"There are only two reasons you'll ever notice the drummer during a live performance: one, he's doing a solo. Two, he's screwed something up. People notice me a lot."

—Jan Kounicova, *That Time I Was Drummer For Honey Banana*

# From Milda with Love

*The following is a true story.*
*Names and dates have been changed*
*to protect the innocent.*

—

**@theo**

I'm checking our mailbox one afternoon when Mini, popping unexpectedly out of my pocket, notices the FredEx package tossed haphazardly onto the hood of Mom's Prius.

"Hey," he says, pointing. "When did the paperboy start delivering mail?"

I walk over to the car and pick up the package. It's soft and lumpy, and is addressed to me, with a sunshine logo as the return address. Retreating back inside my parents' house, I drop off the obligatory junk mail in the front hall, then seat myself at the dining room table. I turn the package over in my hands, curious but also cautious.

"Are chain letters still a thing?" Mini asks, working his way onto the tabletop.

I shrug. "I don't know."

"Postal anthrax?"

Another shrug.

"Severed fingers?"

"Who'd send me a severed finger?"

"Maybe your dad gambled with the wrong crew, and he's been kidnapped, and this is a ransom note threatening to send a finger for every day you don't pay the million-dollar ransom."

I put the package on the table.

"You're not going to open it?" Mini asks.

I glare at him. "Suddenly I've lost interest."

Mini scoffs. "Give it here." He grabs the package, rips it open to reveal a burlap satchel inside. There's a handwritten, jasmine-scented card attached:

*These are my absolute FAVORITE swim trunks!*
***~From Milda with Love***

Opening the satchel, Mini pulls out a fancy-looking pair of designer trunks. He

sets them down, studies them, dumbfounded. "Who's Milda?"

It's rare, but my clients do sometimes send me thank-you gifts for doing their Web sites. I'll be darned if I know who Milda is, though. "Your guess is as good as mine." I look at the card again. There's a Web address for "Milda's of Portland" at the very bottom—and suddenly it makes a little more sense. "Wait, Milda's is a fashion boutique. I've seen their booths at Spendco. This is some kind of free-sample ad campaign."

"Okay, first contact with people you've never met shouldn't involve the sending or receiving of skimpy swimwear via postal mail."

"Yeah. If anything, it's made me *not* want to do business with them."

Mini nods.

Glances again at the swim trunks.

"So..." he says, "are you going to try them on or what?"

## sas going sup

**@theo**

You know how scholars are worried that texting is dumbifying the English language? Case in point:

**evil_ernie:** sas going sup

If ever the world needed a spell check-empowered superhero, it's now.

# Prototype

**@ernie**

Theo's standing with one foot lifted off the floor and is scowling like it's the first time he's ever accidentally stepped on something sticky upon downloading into my bedroom. "Okay, what's so important that I had to drop everything and dunk my foot in what I sincerely hope is, uh...fresh oatmeal?"

"Oatmeal, sure," I say (with no real data to back me up). "Now, we've been stuck shirtless and barefoot for so long I think it's safe to say the Boho Mandate isn't going away anytime soon. Therefore, to capitalize on the resultant market for Mandate-compliant swimwear, I give you...the Dulce & Chobani line of motivational bikini bottoms!" I hold up my prototype for Theo to see.

Pretending to be unimpressed, he reads out loud the text printed across the back: "If only hot guys made eye contact with me the way homeless people do, the world would be a better place." He takes the bikini in both hands, fingers the fabric. "Did you write this with a Sharpie?"

"It's a prototype."

"And did you cut it from an old T-shirt using a house key?"

"*Prototype!*" I yank the bikini away from him. "Well? What do you think?"

Theo props himself against the side of my bed, uses a discarded sock to scrape off the gunk from the bottom of his foot. "The fact that hot girls would have you read their butt for a PSA on lack of eye contact defeats the purpose of such a message in the first place."

"That's the point! I'm making an example by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Why not something more obvious, then? Like, 'Watch where you're going.' Or, 'If you can read this, you're looking the wrong way.' 'My eyes are *not* down here.' Or even just a giant arrow pointing up—"

I shake my head, frowning. "Remind me why I invited you here?"

"Hey, I figured you wanted an honest opinion," Theo replies.

"Friends don't give *honest opinions!* They smile uncomfortably and nod and give you an insincere 'that's nice' or 'mm-hm.' Would it have killed you to smile uncomfortably and nod and give me an insincere 'that's nice' or 'mm-hm,' jerk?"

Theo glowers at me. "Mm-hm."

"Lick shaft! Dulce & Chobani is going to be *el chingon*, and you're just jealous you didn't think of it first!"

"That's nice."

# Morbid Stupidity

**@eva**

"So, just to fill you in, my friends Theo, Eva, Jan, and myself—aka, the Runt Squad—use this app called SuperMegaNet. It lets us upload and download to any phone or computer also running the app. We can also go virtual on literally buttloads of SMN servers around the world. People still use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, I guess—but anyone worth their string bikini has got SuperMegaNet installed. After all, who wants to text and post audio or video when you can actually upload to your favorite spots, actual or virtual? (Quick lingo lesson: *virtual* is when you upload to a server running a Bahamas sim; *actual* is when you upload to the *real* Bahamas.) But because we're so lame, we pretty much stay actual most of the time, uploading to each other's bedrooms—wait, that sounds gay. Can I start over?"

I stop recording, glare at Ernie from behind my DSLR as he unwraps the Twinkie I only now notice he's been holding in his hand the entire time. "Ernie, when I said I'd help you make a video, it was under the pretense that it wasn't going to be anything involving morbid stupidity."

"There's nothing morbid or stupid about what we're doing here!" Ernie shouts, holding the Twinkie halfway to his mouth. "Current events need to be documented, and so we're documenting them!"

Disheartened, I glance at Theo and Jan. We're seated on or around my bed (all of us practicing our boho like good little citizens), and have come to facilitate the filming of Ernie's very first documentary. That's why he's using my camera, by the way. Well, correction: *I'm* using the actual camera. I wouldn't let him touch my equipment in a million years. He's just being his usual ridiculous self. I should've known better, but I'm a shutterbug. My parents recognized this early on and, for my tenth birthday, got me a camera. In the nearly three years since, I've taken pictures and video of anything, everything, everyone. No biggie—lots of girls my age like to do that. However, instead of merely making fish lips or showing off what I'm eating for lunch, I like to edit short documentaries of friends and family. Call them vlogs, if you want. I'm weird like that. I'm always the one who's got her phone out, more content to see a vacation trip to Milan through the lens of a camera than to actually be there in the moment. I think Ernie knew this about me when he asked that I help him film a documentary on life in post-DOSVID-19 San Angelico. *Documentary*, he'd said. Not...whatever this is going on in front of my fifty-millimeter.

"Don't look at *me*," Theo says with an apathetic shrug of his shoulders. "I'm not the one who volunteered to turn her bedroom into a public access TV station."

I frown, face forward again, pressing record and gesturing for Ernie to continue.

"Should I start over or—"

"I'll get it in editing." Possibly. "Action!"

He scarfs his Twinkie. With his mouth full, he mumbles, "Anyway, my friends and I don't really have much in common except that we're all super-smart. Or, smart enough for the powers that be to dump us into high school two years early. They think they were doing us a favor or something, but I can't describe the hell it is to be thirteen years old and attending Boca Linda High. High schoolers are some of the most wretched people you'll ever meet. Everything they do is motivated by sex, money, and how to use one to get the other. You know what Boca Linda means in Spanish? 'Chocolate mouth—'"

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Theo's auto-correct instinct kicking in as he looks up from his phone (I've got him doing behind-the-scenes footage), raises his hand, starts to interrupt—

"—I mean, what the hell is that?" Ernie continues. "A lousy name for a lousy school packed with lousy students who want absolutely nothing to do with us because we're too young to be bought, too young to be boned. So, our academic slave masters lumped us together as part of an assignment. Friends for the friendless even though I already *have* friends. Two-hundred-thirteen of them. Check my buddy list. But I'll hang with Little Asia (that's Theo—geek, small fry, Goten-ish, would give anything to go steady with Eva), Bug Eyes (that's Eva—bug eyes, flat chest, on the wrestling team, wants to snog Jan as badly as Theo wants to snog her), and the Dirty Czech (that's Jan—pronounced *yawn*, closet jock, poor as rain, barely speaks the good Lord's English, into hairy retro bikini babes) if it'll keep them from dying of social starvation. Because that's the kind of thoughtful guy I am—"

"You're calling me 'Little Asia' now?" Theo interrupts again.

I glare at him. "*That's* the part that upsets you? Not the talk of all of us wanting to sleep with each other?"

"You're ruining the take!" Ernie shouts.

"It was already ruined the moment you faced the camera," Jan snickers.

"Also," I add, "I forgot to press record."

Ernie turns livid. "Are you jerking me off? I was on a roll!"

"You *are* a roll."

"Titless tart!"

"Just for that, no *bokeh* for you."

"Fine! Flowers are for girls anyway!"

# Floor Twinkie

**@eva**

I purposely jog the aperture on my camera all the way up to f/22. The ISO makes up for lost light by raising the gain to 12800, resulting in some Bigfoot-caliber grain. Hey, if Ernie's going to be unprofessional, then so am I. But, then, what if he actually gets his little video online somewhere? What if he actually gets *followers?* I'm not really trying to be a pro videographer or anything, but at the very least I don't want it out there that I'm one of those wanna-be's who doesn't know her settings. I open up the aperture again, check my ring light, gesture at Jan to hold the mic boom steady. The content may be lacking, but my part in this freakshow will be impeccable.

"Look, Ernie," I say, "I know it's been kind of sucky with the dosequisvirus lockdowns and the rolling power-ons and the having to dress like we're doing an episode of *Baywatch*, and it's important to decompress and all that, but if I'm being honest, I kind of feel like this video is just an attention-grab."

Ernie adjusts his bath towel. "Technically anything anyone does in front of a camera is an attention-grab. Your point?"

"I thought we were making a *documentary*."

"This *is* a documentary."

"With about as much substance as a laundry list."

"Actually," Theo offers, switching to the notes app on his phone, "he's hitting the major bullet points, introducing himself, his friends, and then transitioning to the subject of the documentary and how it relates to us."

"Thank you, Mr. Spielberg." I glare at Ernie. "Say whatever you want. I'll be keeping my name out of the credits."

"Your loss, toots," Ernie grumbles. "Can we?"

I start recording again. "Action."

"*Anyway*, shaftmeisters, the point is that we only met because we were promoted to the same high school early and had to do this lame class assignment given to us by our chain-smoking guidance counselor. Theo's the geek, Eva's the girl, and Jan's the jock. I'm supposedly the fat kid, though I don't see it..." Ernie trails off, spotting a piece of Twinkie on the floor. "...oh, dropped a piece!" He retrieves it, stuffs it into his mouth, pauses when he notices the rest of us gawking. "Hey, this is conservation, not gluttony!"

"Whatever you say," Theo murmurs.

"At least he's cleaning up after himself," Jan adds.

# The New Abnormal

**@eva**

Ernie flicks us off, licks his fingers. "Your insults can't hurt me. I've learned to cope with a heckuva lot thanks to DOSVID-19. The world is a much different place than it was just a year ago. A little darker, a little grittier, a little more absurd, a whole lot crazier. We're standing around in government-mandated bikinis and bath towels because the city didn't have a dosequisvirus plan in place, and so we're re-hashing some crusty old Santana Winds disaster plan instead. Mayor Dude Coolson's Boho Mandate has reduced everyone to suburban savages. Mandatory boho, spray bottles and sheen checks, rolling power-ons four times daily, social distancing. All this because someone sneezed once upon a time, and the teeming masses demanded that something be done. So, Coolson and his cronies did something, slapped a #SheenLife hashtag on it, threw around lame catch phrases like, 'Go boho, save lives!' and 'We're all in this together!' And here we are.

"The dosequisvirus outbreak, it's not an epidemic, it's a war on suburbia that started over a hundred years ago. Get the families off their own land and into the big cities where they're dependent on the large corporations for everything from food to clothing to shelter. Then, wipe out the excess with an epidemic here, an outbreak there. Keep us all shirtless and wet and fighting over bottles of alcohol, rolls of toilet paper. Shut down the grid, give us just enough power to charge our phones and pay our bills and keep up to date with the latest propaganda. 'We're all in this together!' Except we're not.

"This is the new abnormal. Nothing's changed. *We* haven't changed. The world's still the same crazy place it always was. Everyone's just owning up to the craziness now." Ernie leans back, adjusts his bath towel for effect.

I look at Theo.

His expression isn't reassuring. "I feel like he's trying to say something meaningful, but it's also like I'm sitting next to the weird guy on the bus."

Sighing, I ask, "Ernie, are you done with the intro?"

"Almost," he replies.

"Let's get this over, then."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Right now. *Action*."

Ernie clears his throat, contorts his face into a sinister sneer. "Know, then, that this impending epic fail video is our unbiased, unabashed look at post-DOSVID-19 suburban life in San Angelico. We are the Runt Squad, and this is..."

He makes a flapping motion with his arm.

"What?" I ask.

"*This is*..." He flaps again.

"What does *this*—" I mimic his arm motion. "—mean?"

"Close-up!"

"Why didn't you just say 'close-up?'" I scoot my tripod closer and re-frame. As I'm doing so, Ernie holds his stance—I think he's holding his breath, too—until at last I give him a thumbs up.

"...*The New Abnormal*." Breath released.

The rest of us are noticeably underwhelmed.

"That's it?" Jan asks.

Ernie frowns at him. "What do you mean, 'that's it?' This is supposed to be dramatic! Provocative! Hook the viewer! Eerie shadows and such!"

"You could've just said the entire sentence. Eva said she'll be editing later."

"Also," Theo says, "are we doing a documentary or some kind of cheesy horror movie?"

Ernie holds up his middle finger. "Y'all can sit on this."

I check my phone. It's barely lunchtime power hour.

This is going to be a long shoot.

# BestAshEVAR2003, Episode #327: What I've Been Up To – Part 1

**@ashley**

Hello, everyone! Ashley here. I haven't done any vlogging for a while, and there's a reason for that, which I'll reveal at the end of this video. But before I show you, I want to tell you *how* it happened, because, well...let me say that just when I thought things couldn't get any weirder than DOSVID-19 and bikini mandates, things got *way* weirder.

Let's go back to last Saturday night. I kid you not, it's, like, the beginning of a cheesy horror movie, with thunder and lightning and wind and rain and everything. My parents are out of town for the weekend, and me and my bestie Zoe —*hey, gurl!*—are having a sleepover. We didn't plan for a sleepover. We were chilling all afternoon and lost track of time, and Zoe totally missed evening power hour, and since I forgot to charge my phone—well, duh, you know how SuperMegaNet works. So, I'm like, "Okay, babe, it's the storm of the century outside. You're spending the night and uploading back home in the morning. Power's off, and I am *not* about sleeping in a big-ass house all by myself!"

So, we're, like, getting ready for bed. You know, showering and filling our spray bottles and moisturizing each other—because everyone knows the more hydrated your skin is, the less likely you are to catch rogue embers. This is what I use, by the way. It's called Eternal Sheen, by Milda's of Portland. Link in the description below.

Anyway, there's me and Zoe sitting cross-legged on the floor while our bikinis air-dry. Life *sucks* without washers and dryers, by the way. I'm on edge because of how the rain is absolutely *drenching* my bedroom window. You can't even see the streetlights outside. Zoe's freaking me out, too, because every time she moves around her thighs squeak loudly against the tile floor. We laugh every time it happens, but it's that nervous kind of laugh. You know, the way you laugh when you're pretending everything's awesome sauce even though everyone knows it's not? Call me crazy, but I do this thing whenever I want to calm my nerves during a storm: I clean, organize, go through old boxes of stuff. It makes me feel like I'm in control. Zoe knows this about me. When I broke up with my last boyfriend, I cleaned. When Peter Template announced he was leaving Members of the Board after their Quarterly Earnings world tour, I sorted. This particular night, I'm decluttering the closet. I've got, like, a *mess* of cardboard boxes and plastic storage containers spread out in front of me.

Zoe—don't worry, we were six feet apart, we measured—is like, "OMFG, you're such an OCD freak, Ashley. You know that, right?"

And I'm like, "Say *what*, girlfriend?"

And Zoe's like, "Every time it rains you clean your room."

And, like, there I am doing my organizing when Zoe points under the bed and asks, "What's that?"

## BestAshEVAR2003, Episode #327: What I've Been Up To – Part 2

**@ashley**

I take a peek, and I see this old-school cassette tape, right? It looks like one of my mom's old mix tapes. Zoe asks me if I've got a cassette player, and I'm like, "I think my old boombox plays tapes."

"Let's listen to it, then!" Zoe squeals (don't get me started on her squealing).

I'm like, "Um, the point being?"

And she says, "To hear what your mom listened to before music was invented."

I know—*har-har*. So, I go over to my closet. (For a virtual tour, check out "BestAshEVAR2003, Episode #248: Ashley's Bomb-Ass Closet," linked below.) I pull out my beat-up old Memorex. Amazingly, it's still got batteries in it, and even more amazingly, they still work. We load up the cassette tape, then sprawl ourselves on the floor—because, you know, that's the only *correct* way to listen to a boombox. We press play together. Literally, we count to three, it's my hand over hers, cutest thing in the world. The first song kicks in, and it's like, *huh?* I know my mom's taste in music is *meh* at best, but this is some kind of Mexican mariachi band we're listening to. Now, I'm not knocking Mexican mariachi music. It's just, I'm a little—a *lot*—surprised that my mom ever deviated from her usual Christian-country-adult-contemporary roots.

Zoe's expression says it all, and she shakes her head, sticks out her tongue. She's like, "It sounds like that stuff you hear at Mexican birthday parties."

Here's the weird part: we keep listening. It's not my thing, and it's definitely not Zoe's, but neither of us thinks to press the stop button. I swear we're in some kind of trance. I can feel myself getting sleepy all of the sudden. I look over at Zoe. Her head's all drooped forward with her hair covering her face. I'm guessing that's why she's not caring that there's a strange *something* floating above her head. My first thought is that it's a rogue ember. You hear about them all the time in the news, but you never really *see* them. Naturally, I start to freak, reaching for my spray bottle, calling out, "Zoe! *Zoe!* Rogue ember!" But everything's in slow motion. My arms feel like they weigh a hundred pounds each. I manage to roll onto my side before my body just sort of gives out, and I lie there watching as the ember flutters around Zoe's head. The longer I watch, though, the more the ember seems to resemble a musical note. Crazy, right? It buzzes around her head, drifts down toward her butt, then back up again to her head, this...this glowing, insect-like musical note thingie. And poor Zoe, she's just as frozen as I am, lying there all

helpless. The note thingie hovers over her for a while longer—and then plunges itself hard into her ear. She goes all wide-eyed and rigid for a sec before passing out completely.

That's when I notice a similar glowing note hovering over my own head. I can see it out of the corner of my eye, dancing down my torso and back up again, sizing me up like the other note had sized up Zoe. Studying me. Then there's this sudden pain in my ear and...that's the last thing I remember before waking up the next morning. I know, I've lost you, right? There's more. The cassette tape is *gone*. Like, Zoe and me can't find it *anywhere*. It's as if it never existed. And...well, let me tilt the camera down so you can see...

...yeah. I'm nine months pregnant. Zoe, too. I'll let her tell her own story. The doctors are calling it a spontaneous pregnancy, which is really just fancy speak for, "We have no idea how this happened." But anyway, that's why I haven't been vlogging. I debated whether or not I was even going to talk about this at all. I mean, teenage mom-to-be blaming her baby on some kind of supernatural cassette tape...I don't know if anyone watching this will believe me. I wouldn't believe me, either. I don't care, though. You know me. I don't like to keep things to myself, and this is something I had to get off my chest. If there's someone else who's gone through the same thing, I'd love to hear from you in the comments below. The dosequisvirus epidemic has everyone throwing around "we're all in this together!" affirmations and all that. Maybe we can be in this together, too.

Don't forget to like this video and subscribe to my channel. Smooches, everyone!

## Reluctant Invitation

**@theo**

"My mom's insisting on throwing me a pool party for my birthday, and you're all invited," Eva says as part of a long, unenthusiastic sigh. Tray in hand, she joins Ernie, Jan, and myself at our recent lunchtime henge out on the football field. It's funny how subtly Boca Linda's image has shifted from high school to sweatshop: socially-distanced gatherings of fire-resistant, artisan-looking stone workbenches; teachers and sheen monitors armed with spray bottles and grabber sticks (the spray bottles for touching up your sheen if you look too dry, the grabbers to separate undesirables caught throwing around PDAs or simply standing too close to one other); boho teenagers sitting at their grindstones, as it were, and using the power hour to charge their devices, update their statuses, eat their lunches. Well, *I'm* eating, anyway. Jan's busy doing something on his phone. Ernie has a copy of *The San Angelico Daily Angel* spread out beside his usual junk food buffet—untouched in this rare instance—and is availing himself of the latest celebrity gossip and conspiracy theories.

"Why do you sound like you're turning thirty instead of thirteen?" I ask Eva.

"We *all* sound like we're thirty," Jan comments offhandedly. "That's why we have no friends."

"We have no friends because we don't put out," Ernie clarifies, and points to the lively gang of older kids preening a couple of workbenches over. (Notice how they're all fit and beautiful and earning social cred by doing nothing more than metabolizing while underdressed. Bohos are always like that. "We're all in this together!" seems to be the catchphrase of choice in today's post-DOSVID world except when it comes to skimping with the fat or old or subjectively ugly. I feel like they should have a carnival ride sign: "You must be *this* beautiful to go boho.")

Eva says to me, "When it comes to birthdays, my mom likes to band together with all the other moms she knows and make a big deal over nothing."

"It's not nothing," I tell her. "It's your birthday."

"*Blech*. Please say you're not one of those birthday cake zealots."

Jan looks up momentarily. "What's a birthday cake zealot?"

"You know, those over-enthusiastic party nuts. People who just *have* to plan out everything right down to the last detail days, weeks, months, or even years in advance, complete with itineraries, dress codes, seating arrangements, and menu selections so that everything becomes one big *chore*. People who can't just *throw* a party, they have to *organize* it."

I shake my head. "No, I am not that."

"My mom kind of is. Alone, she's manageable. But when she collaborates with other moms, it snowballs into this...this big...*thing*. I tell her I'm okay with just pizza and cake, and she assumes I'm making a thinly-veiled cry for *more* RSVPs, *more* streamers, *more* balloons. Before you know it, you end up with this perfect, impending event that's held to such a high standard all that's left is certain disappointment. As opposed to something that's, say, seventy-percent planned, thirty improv. Something where there's a chance for the experience to be *better* as well as worse. At the very least, you might be pleasantly surprised."

Mini works himself out of my messenger bag. "Wow. And all these years I thought parties were something you do when you want to have *fun*."

"I'm just frustrated that it's becoming my mom's party instead of mine."

"Who else is going?"

"Summer. Lily. A few friends from their school or something. No more than ten guests because of dosequisvirus limitations. I figure if you guys are there, that'll leave less room for everyone else."

"Um...thanks?" I say.

## Fiction Today, Fact Tomorrow

**@theo**

Ernie goes back to his *Daily Angel*. "Why do you rub elbows with those powder-puff pixies?"

"They're my friends," Eva replies.

"I never see you hanging out with them."

"They live in Wisconsin."

"SuperMegaNet makes that moot," Mini points out.

Instead of frowning at him, Eva frowns at me. "I never see *you* hanging with any of your friends."

Mini answers on my behalf: "See Jan's comment above. When's the party going down?"

"Saturday."

"You mean tomorrow," Ernie snorts.

"Yeah. Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Why did you wait until the day before to tell us?"

"I wasn't planning on telling you at all," Eva says. "It's going to be lame. But with you three there it'll be, well, you know. Not *as* lame." She folds her arms. "Are you coming or not?"

I nod. I'm the complete opposite of a party animal. However, it's off-campus time with Eva, which is always a bonus. And anyway, it's nice to be included—even if I'm only going to be there to make an unbearable situation slightly less unbearable.

"I'll need a pass," Jan says. "I've got stuff to do this weekend. Besides, social distancing and all."

Eva's face and body briefly morph from indifferent jockette into disappointed anime girl, complete with Lakitu-like miniature rain cloud hovering over one shoulder. "That's okay." Tiny thunder rumbles—

"I'll make it up to you, though."

—and Lakitu is gone, normalcy restored.

"Personally, I'm looking forward to the festivities," Mini says. "It's nice to know one of us is finally having a proper birthday. It feels like we've all been twelve for *years*."

Resisting the sudden urge to deadpan a camera that isn't there, I grab my spray bottle, mist my arms, glance over at Ernie and his *Daily Angel*. "Why do you read those ridiculous tabloids?"

"Today's fiction is tomorrow's fact," he replies, and, keeping his eyes glued to whatever article he's reading, feels around his workbench for a cookie.

"Maybe *science* fiction," Eva says, picking at her food, "but not the stuff in the *Daily Angel*."

"That's hardly the kind of talk I'd expect from a girl who lives with a life-sized Jack Skellington doll in her bedroom."

"You're just jealous because you can't eat him."

I glance back at Ernie, waiting for his usual retort.

Instead, he gasps and grips his *Daily Angel* with both hands. "Shut up, Bug Eyes, and listen to this!"

Eva scowls.

It makes her bug eyes look even bigger.

## Spontaneous Pregnancies

**@theo**

"A string of spontaneous pregnancies is sweeping the world! They're saying the pregnancies have been linked to a cassette tape of Mexican *banda* music, with the pregnees conceiving almost as soon as they listen to it!"

Bewildered, I ask, "*Pregnees?*"

Ernie continues to read: "'SuperMegaNet users should be especially cautious, since it appears the epidemic, dubbed *El Cassetto* by various online communities, is spreading primarily via SuperMegaServers worldwide.'" He puts the tabloid down and stares wide-eyed into the distance. "Oh, my *Gawd! We* use SuperMegaNet!"

Eva looks the other way, embarrassed. "Why do I sit here every lunch break?"

Ernie jabs his finger at her. "You could wake up pregnant tomorrow!"

"Not likely. I'm not letting any boy touch me unless—"

"He's Jan?"

"No! Unless he's my *husband!*"

"Hear that, Janny Boy?" Ernie nods at Jan. "Bug Eyes said she'll let you make it with her if you get married!"

Jan looks neither amused nor unamused—his usual, everyday expression. "Ernie, that's dumb."

"Maybe for a cold-hearted Czech who doesn't believe in waiting until marriage to have sex with the girl of her dreams."

(Eva's face is turning beet-red.)

"Not that," Jan says. "I'm talking about the cassette tape."

"Mexican *banda* music! Spontaneous pregnancies! Don't you see what's happening? *El Cassetto* has caused saturation in the Mexican population, now it's after us!"

I roll my eyes, half-successfully focus my attention on my homemade vegan wrap. "Dude, could we make it through a single lunch without you being incredibly naïve and racist?"

"Ignorance doesn't make the bad go away, junior!"

## Rich. White. Boy.

**@theo**

"Ernie, it isn't this supposed cassette tape that's getting these girls pregnant. It's just a racial stereotype. *Banda* is what *some* Mexicans listen to when they drink, and drinking is what *everyone* does when they have sex."

Ernie sends me a heavy-lidded glare. "I don't like your generalizing, rich white boy."

"I don't know why you keep calling me 'rich white boy.'"

"You're rich, you're white—"

"Dude, my dad's Chinese-Vietnamese."

Ernie spreads his arms and inadvertently drops half his cookie onto the ground as he stares me down. "Goten-esque your eyes may be, but otherwise you're all white bread—"

"And I'm not rich."

"Oh? Answer me this, then. Do you own a smartphone?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Do you live in a two-story, four-bedroom house with fiber-optic Internet connectivity?

"Yeah—"

"Do you have a gym membership? A personal therapist?"

"You know it's only to help with my sleep issues—"

Ernie puts on a condescending expression, his finger poised in mid-air. "Rich. White. Boy."

"Whatever." I've been called worse.

"Ernie," Eva says, sighing, "I don't care what *The Daily Angel* says. You can't get pregnant from listening to a cassette tape."

Ernie flails his arms, aiming an expression of urgency at her. "It's not just any tape, it's *the* tape—*El Cassetto*. Like in that movie, *The Ring*. Only now it's a cursed cassette tape of Mexican taco music!"

I interject: "Dude, what did I *just* tell you about the racism thing?"

"Why a tape?" Eva asks. "Why not an evil playlist?"

"Because Mexicans can't afford the monthly streaming fee," Ernie replies.

Eva glowers at him. "Are you really an honors student, or is it a title-only kind of thing?"

"You know what?" Ernie rips the wrapper off a fruit pie, takes a hearty bite. Adjusts his bath towel. With his mouth full: "Sucketh mine wiener, the lot of

you.”

# Flaming Nightmare

**@theo**

I glance around the football field. It seems busier than usual. Like, I'm almost sure there are more students here today than there were last week. I wonder how many of them are actually from Boca Linda, and how many have downloaded from their own respective schools for lunchtime power hour. Not that I could tell either way; the only people I know at Boca Linda are sitting beside me. The rest of the school may as well be empty for all the attention Ernie, Eva, Jan, and myself get. I can't say I blame the older kids, though. At very nearly thirteen, I'm probably less interested in making friends with ten-year-olds than the fifteen and sixteen-year-olds are in making friends with me. I get it. Still, it would be nice to be acknowledged once in a while. SuperMegaNet was supposed to connect me and the rest of the Runt Squad to the world. Instead, we just connected with each other, and that was it. I'm not complaining. I had zero friends before. Now I have three. That's an increase of three-hundred percent. And if I'm telling the truth, it kind of makes sense. Social cliques are all or nothing. The Runt Squad, we're neither black nor white. We're...grayscale. Nobody knows what to do with us. Nobody *wants* to know.

Look at the jock workbenches. You might think all you need are sleek muscles and a competitive attitude to pull up a stool, but listen to them talk for a few minutes. Yeah, muscles and attitude help, but participation in a sport slash being on a team is also mandatory. Eva could probably worm her way in...if only she wore makeup and had breasts and was older. *Maybe* Jan, if he really turned on the charm. And was older. Ernie? He's more Jovian. If he weren't so crass, I could see people orbiting around his mass like moons around Jupiter. Introverted geeks like me who listen to Asia and also happen to go to their mom's gym? We occupy the crevices between the cliques. The thespians, the lesbians, the Goths, stoners, losers, jocks, geeks, and general affluents, to name but a few, all have singular identities.

"Nice *Hella War* cloth."

Snapping out of a reverie I didn't even realize I was in, I look up. Ernie's just paid a dubious compliment to that Mark Howard guy I run into from time to time. I think Jan has Mr. Johnson's class with him or something. Oh, and Eva once mentioned him being on the wrestling team. Which makes sense, because he's absolutely ripped—and oddly top-heavy. Like, he's all pecs and biceps, as if he just works out those two muscle groups and gets to the rest of himself in his spare time.

Mark stops beside Ernie's workbench, glances down at his barbarian-looking

loincloth (Boho Mandate-compliant, apparently). "Thanks. You play?"

"I've been known to dabble," Ernie replies. "My deathboard ranking is Bloody Entrails."

"Mine's Flaming Nightmare."

"*What?* You've made it to Flaming Nightmare?"

Mark grins. "Hellpocalypse campaign. 100,000 XP."

Eva sends Jan a confused look. "What are they talking about?"

"*Hella War*," Jan replies.

I explain further: "It's that action role-playing hack-and-slash video game that was in the news last month for causing violent diarrhea in a bunch of players." Though more of a Nintendo fanboy, I can still appreciate the fact that to get to Flaming Nightmare in *Hella War*, you've got to be insanely good.

"Of *course* that's a thing." Eva shakes her head. "Of *course*."

"Hey, it's a better white noise than racist conspiracy theories involving make-believe cassette tapes."

"I guess."

# Betcha

**@theo**

While the rest of us grub in relative quiet, Ernie and Mark go face-to-face with their *Hella War* peacocking, swapping stats, dropping clan names, and exchanging obnoxious wang-related boasts. So important is their showing off that Mark's now eating his lunch while standing. Ernie, too. It's like they're marking their territory or something.

Eventually, the warning bell rings.

I stuff Mini back into my bag and grab my tray, heading for one of the tray trolleys. "Later, guys," I say, waving.

Jan and Eva wave back.

Mark nods, pops one last potato wedge into his mouth, and departs.

"Wait for me!" Ernie shouts, hurriedly stuffing surplus snacks into his backpack. My hope is to lose him in the crowd of kids returning their trays, but as luck would have it, he catches up, dispenses his tray, follows me into the Boca Linda main hallway and to my locker. He stands beside me, securing his bath towel with one hand, watching the other students walk to class. "You see it too, right? It's not just me?"

"See what?" I ask. I open my locker.

"This school is full of pregnees all of the sudden."

I glance down the hall. Admittedly, there are more than a few girls sporting suspicious stomach bulges. But that's nothing new. "Boca Linda has *always* had a lot of pregnant girls. You've just never paid attention before."

Ernie frowns. "I've paid attention."

"It's pattern recognition, wishful thinking. Like when you hear a new word for the first time. Suddenly you start hearing it everywhere. But that doesn't mean no one's said it before, or that more people are suddenly using the word." I smile, watch another pregnant girl go by. "Then again, maybe there's an Ernie Goodale look-alike contest going on."

"Shaddup."

"First prize—a year's supply of chocolate-covered corn dogs."

"Screw you and your delicious insults."

Messenger bag loaded, I close my locker and walk to class.

Ernie trails along, mosquito-like.

"What do you care if all these high school kids can't control their raging hormones?" I ask him.

"I don't care about *them*," Ernie says, "I care about being *right*. And I'm willing to put fifty bucks on it."

"Fifty dollars on what, exactly?"

"On my being right about a single, evil freaking tape causing all these unexpected pregnancies. Are you game, rich white boy? I know you've probably got fifty bucks in pocket change right now."

"Do *you* have fifty bucks?"

"No—but I don't need to, because I'm *right!*"

I stop outside my fifth-period classroom. "Thinking you're right doesn't make you right. You need proof, facts, and, oh, what's that thing called? Evidence?"

Ernie nods. "So, it's settled. I'm going to find *El Cassetto*, prove to you that I'm right, and then I'm going to knock you up with it."

"I'm a guy." I shake my head disappointedly. "I can't get pregnant."

"Nah-ah! Arnold Schwarzenegger *totally* got pregnant when he banged Danny DeVito in that movie!"

"Go to class, Ernie."

## Repackaged Goods

**@thrailkill**

Hello, my darling. I see you there, your angelic façade floating behind a shroud of rich, satisfying tobacco smoke. Ashley Chambers, seventeen years old, Boca Linda senior, straight-A student, cheerleader, skimper, vlogger, local sweetheart and unplanned initiate into impending motherhood. But that's the church-friendly version, isn't it? That's the polite summary we entered into your file. The truth: you've traded away your precious virtue for the horny boyfriend, and now you've come to my office that we might salvage what's left of your waning academic career.

"Well, well," I say after the obligatory lengthy pause. "Another student mom-to-be. Another victim of the runaway locomotive that is the adolescent male libido." Yes, dear. Go ahead and cup your hand over your mouth and nose. Go head and glance down at your swollen belly, ever more obvious due to your skimpy boho attire. "Needless to say, your class schedule is now woefully outdated. It says here in your permanent record that you had a 'spontaneous pregnancy?'"

"My doctor told me it's the sixth case he's seen this week," you say. "He can't explain it. I can't explain it, either. I mean, my boyfriend and I are abstinent. I don't know how this possibly could've happened."

Sounds like my first marriage. "Abstinence isn't having him disengage at the last second, honey. Nor is it merely availing yourself of his tireless erections between your monthly cycle."

"No, I mean we really are abstinent."

"And yet somehow there's a bun in that oven."

"Like, I know, right?"

I can wait all afternoon, precious.

But so can you, it would seem. Fair enough. "Very well. Let's hear it. For posterity."

Frowning and pretending to be offended by that particularly lovely-looking tendril of smoke caressing your porcelain cheek, off you go: "So, me and my friend Zoe are, like, having a sleepover, right? It's all rainy outside. We're in my bedroom and going through some old things to pass the time, and we find this cassette tape. We figure it's got some old-timey music on it or whatever, so we play it just for kicks. After that...well, it's funny. I can't remember the music clearly, but I know it was like that stuff you hear in, um, Mexican neighborhoods during barbecues. It seemed to fill my head, even though I know it couldn't have been that loud. Next

thing I know, I'm, like, totally preggers."

My cigarette smolders in my hand; a small chunk of ash breaks off and tumbles across the desktop. "Tell me, princess, have you ever heard of mass hysteria?"

"That's a death metal band, right?"

"You're not the first girl to come in here looking to change her class schedule because of a 'spontaneous pregnancy.'"

"But that's what happened. I swear."

"And where is this tape now?"

"I don't know. Zoe and I looked for it after we woke up from our trance or whatever it was, but we couldn't find it."

Look at you, all pouty as you lift your spray bottle and mist your arms and abdomen. So serious, so certain. But I can tell you right now, I'm not seeing anything new. Every other pregnant lass in my office as of late has tried to sell me the same story, but I'm not buying repackaged goods. Call these spontaneous pregnancies whatever you want, it's all derivative of that age-old formula: girl wants to be loved, wants to rebel, simply wants a little friction between her legs. She says yes, yes, oh, *God* a handful of times, and before she can catch her breath, it's over, the boyfriend's out the door and on his way. As the weeks and months pass, she realizes she's stuck with an ever-expanding reminder of the wrong choice made at the wrong time. A few moments of good loving traded for nine months of bloating, nausea, stretch marks, mood swings and hot flashes...she can't cope with the pregnancy being her *choice*, and so she offsets the blame, in this case placing it squarely on a mysterious cassette tape.

I light another cigarette. "Darling, what we have here is an urban myth. A tall tale. Something a seventh grader might tell her parents. So, let's cut the crap, shall we? This is high school. No one actually believes in urban myths."

**@ernie**

School library.

Tabloid section.

Holy shiat—this one's got Bat Boy on the cover, so you *know* the headline is kosher:

"Scientist" discovers solid link between
sports drink consumption and penile atrophy...

Oh.

My.

*God.*

# Low Riders

**@theo**

Baseball cap.
Sunglasses.
Oversized Linux T-shirt.
Shorts.
Flip-flops.

"You look like some kind of K-pop star trying to blend in at a swap meet," Ernie laughs, downloading beside me in my bedroom.

"Says the guy who went with a *beach towel* for DOSVID-19 compliance," I reply, and turn from the full-length mirror, gesture at Ernie's very big and very fruity Tommy Bahama.

"Hey, I'm fat. Fat people have absolutely no business going boho. But we *can* get away with wearing a towel in the steam room while discussing insider trading secrets. I'm merely dressing accordingly." Ernie nods at my getup. "So, are you staging an anti-#SheenLife protest or something?"

I'm dealing with crippling shyness and morbid self-doubt, actually. "I don't, uh, skimp a lot."

"What are you talking about? You've been skimping along with the best of us since the Boho Mandate first started."

"Yeah, but that was with you guys, and not in front of friends of friends."

"Aw, is this another one of your cute little phobias?"

Absolutely. "*No*."

Ernie smirks at my torso. "By the way, you look *so* Asian right now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Besides having the prominent low-riders—" He gestures at my calves. "—T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops is the official uniform of Asian dudes the world over."

"And a whole lot of other people, too," I point out.

"Yeah, but Asian guys are *always* bumming around Starbucks in easternwear. And they get zero deductions for it. Like, if anyone else shows up wearing shorts and flip-flops, you're wondering if it's laundry day. But if an Asian dude does it, you're like, oh—he's just Asian."

"One day—*one day* without the racism is all I ask, Ernie."

"Your people have the unique superpower of looking completely presentable in shorts and flip-flops while anyone else would look under-dressed. I'm not being racist, I'm stating a fact."

"Stating your *fat*, you mean."

Ernie goes over to my desk, grabs my phone.

"Hey!" I yell, darting after him. "What're you doing?"

"Making a point."

"Ernie—"

"Relax. I'm just doing an image search." He taps something out, shows me the phone. The search results offer up a variety of Asians in coffee shop settings. They're all sporting Ernie's so-called *easternwear*, and are working diligently on their various Apple products.

"Yeah?" I say. "So what?"

Ernie does another search.

The second batch of images: bus stops featuring random collections of college students waiting for their rides. The white people are in skinny jeans, the black people in trainers. For the girls, it's leggings across the board. The token Asian dude? You guessed it, he's got on a T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. And a baseball cap.

Ernie searches yet again.

A KBBQ: *so* many tees, shorts, and flip-flops—

"So *what?*" I exclaim through clenched teeth. I take back my phone.

Ernie leans in close. "Embrace your heritage, Daiso."

"Daiso's *Japanese*, dumbass. My Asian side is Chinese-Vietnamese."

"Whatevs. Are you ready to crash Bug Eyes' birthday party?"

I return to the mirror, frowning. "I don't think I'm going to go."

"Why not?"

"I've got stuff to do."

"We *all* have stuff to do. Partying is stuff we *want* to do."

"I'm just not the party type."

"But you've already accepted the invite, right?"

"Yeah."

"And your parents have already talked to Eva's parents?"

"Well, yeah."

"*And* you already told the Bugster you'd go."

I did.

"If she finds out you ditched her just to hang out here in your bedroom all day, she's going to think you're not in love with her anymore."

"I don't think she cares about, er, that."

"Oh, a girl her age *cares*. She's just being cool about it. Fricking women."

"It's not that," I say, half-truthfully. "I don't go in swimming pools. The chlorine's bad for your skin. I was thinking about maybe going as Puck, but I kind of want to stay default. You know, it being Eva's birthday and all."

"Then go default."

"I'm...embarrassed."

Ernie rolls his eyes. "Then go as Puck."

"I'm kind of over that."

"Then just freaking...*go*."

"I don't know anyone there."

"You know Eves. And me. And I'm sure Summer Breeze and Lilyhammer will be present."

"I have a Web site that's due."

"When?"

"Next week." I bite my lip.

Ernie sighs. "Fine, loser. If that's the way you want it, I'll go all by myself and tell Bugsy you said *blah*. Swipe me to her place."

I hold up my phone—

—and at the last second Ernie grabs me by the arm, pulls me into frame as my finger taps the "Send" button.

"Hey!" I yell.

"Thank me later," Ernie coos.

## The Ultimate Rush Star-Rating List

**@theo**

We upload out of my bedroom and into Eva's backyard. Correction: onto the pool deck of the large swimming pool set in the middle of what can only be described as a miniature rolling meadow. There's a trampoline, a Slip 'N Slide, a small clubhouse toward the back. The neighbors' houses share casual borders denoted by lines of shrubbery and potted plants. Bikinis abound. Nobody's social distancing or maintaining their sheens. Dad and the other parents are sipping soda and beer while observing us from a respectful distance. Needless to say, everyone's fit and fresh. Well, Dad, while definitely not fat, is a slightly over-padded average. All the other dads are ripped as heck. And the moms...whoa, the moms. The Boho Mandate definitely agrees with the moms.

And then there's Ernie and myself, the proverbial sore thumbs.

"*This* is Eva's backyard?" Ernie murmurs. "Her family's even more loaded than yours!"

I've only ever been inside her bedroom. From out here, it's obvious: even in a dosequisvirus economy, the Taylors are indeed well-off. Enough that their neighborhood uses the honor system when it comes to property lines. That's how you can gauge a family's wealth—whether or not their neighborhood uses traditional fencing.

Some random girl goes bounding by, yelling at everyone to "watch this!" as she layouts into the deep end of the pool.

From a Bluetooth speaker set on the deck railing, Asia Afrodesia wails on about summer boys being the best kind of boys.

"Jesus," Ernie grunts. "It's a cuteness festival."

Dad waves at me. He's got a spatula in his hand, and is wearing an apron with, "Keep calm and grill on" printed on the front. He's manning the Taylors' grill (I forget sometimes that even though nowadays he's a vegetarian like me and Mom, he was raised as a traditional meat-eater).

Pretending not to see him, I take a step toward the snack table, act like there's a chance in Shannara I might be interested in the various gluten and sugar-based products wilting under the sun. Beta and I once had a conversation about how he passes the time during awkward social situations. He told me he creates mental star-rating lists of his favorite bands' albums.

"For example, using a five-star rating system," he'd said, "Rush's list would go like this: *Rush*, *Fly By Night*, and *Caress of Steel*, three stars. *2112*, five stars. *A*

*Farewell to Kings*, four. *Hemispheres*, *Permanent Waves*, and *Moving Pictures*, five. *Signals*, *Grace Under Pressure*, *Power Windows*, and *Hold Your Fire*, three. *Presto* and *Roll the Bones*, four. *Counterparts*, five. *Test for Echo*, three. *Vapor Trails*, two. *Feedback* doesn't count. *Snakes & Arrows*, three. *Clockwork Angels*, four."

So, I do my own Rush star-rating list in my head. It's almost identical to Beta's, except for the post-*Moving Pictures* eighties albums, which I find more appealing than Beta would ever admit possible. Yes, the synth-heavy *Signals*, *Grace Under Pressure*, *Power Windows*, and *Hold Your Fire* pretty much demote Alex Lifeson from lead guitarist to mere accompanist, but *Power Windows* is definitely a solid four-star album. And *Hold Your Fire*, while still a three, at best, paradoxically opens with one of my four all-time favorite Rush songs: "Force Ten" (the other three being "Tom Sawyer," "Subdivisions," and the woefully underrated "BU2B"). Beta hates when I talk about "Force Ten." He's a die-hard fan of the seventies heavy metal Rush, while I actually prefer their work during the decade and a half from *Moving Pictures* to *Test for Echo*. He says the band should've stuck with heavy metal instead of trading in their power trio abilities for synthesizers and hair spray. I tell him if he wants post-seventies Rush heaviness, look no further than "Stick It Out," "Driven" (or several tracks from *Test for Echo*, actually), "Headlong Flight," and the aforementioned awesomeness that is "BU2B"—because while post-seventies Rush may no longer be heavy metal, it's definitely still hard rock, and, on occasion since *Counterparts*, a *kind* of metal. Soft metal, I'd joked once, to which Beta had responded with, "Pewter."

# Fruit Salad

**@theo**

"Are those going to work?"

I look up.

Eva, ponytailed, lipsticked, and sporting her usual fruit salad-patterned swimsuit, has appeared by my side, and is smirking at my shirt, my hat and sunglasses—at pretty much all of me.

"Oh, I'm not going swimming," I say.

"You came to a swim party to *not* go swimming?"

"Chlorine's bad for your skin."

"That's why you shower right after." Eva gestures at the clubhouse.

*Fidget-fidget.* "I'll be fine."

"What about the Boho Mandate? Your spray bottle?"

I flash a cheesy, conspiratorial smile, and glance over my shoulder, as if the boho police might burst onto the scene at any moment. "Will you keep my secret?"

"Hey, dressed or undressed, thanks for coming." Eva gives me a hug—

Oh, God, there's something moving around in my shorts!

—turns to Ernie, who's scrutinizing her swimsuit disdainfully. "Hi, Ernie."

"You *do* know there's such a thing as too much color, right?" he asks.

No hug from Eva. "Where did you shop for the towel? Chin & Jowl?"

"Yeah, actually. My Gramps gets a senior discount. When you're finished here, drop by my place so that I can calibrate my computer monitor."

(My shorts stir of their own accord for a moment longer before I realize, thank God, that it's only Mini poking his head out of my pocket.)

Eva rolls her eyes, puts her hands on her hips. "Grow up, gas giant."

"When you talk like that, you insult not only me, but yourself as well."

Eva faces me again. "I can't tell if that was a crack or a comment or even a coherent thought."

I sigh. "Welcome to my world." And for what it's worth, I think your fruity one-piece is absolutely *stupendous*.

Ernie sticks his tongue out at us and begins investigating the snack table more thoroughly.

# Thirteen

**@theo**

"Happy birthday, by the way," I say to Eva.

"Thanks."

"How does it feel to be thirteen?"

"Everything's different. You see the world in a whole new way. Food tastes better. Adult jokes suddenly make sense. You just sort of *know* who you are and what your place in life is."

"Wow, really?"

Eva smiles, rolls her eyes. "Of course not, dork."

"I knew that."

"*Sure* you did." She looks across the way. "Honestly, though? Thirteen's one step forward, two steps back."

I want to say, "Really?" again, but instead I just raise an eyebrow.

"Like, the step forward is that I finally get to wear makeup."

"I noticed."

"Mm-hm. It's a deal I had with my mom. No makeup until I'm thirteen. Now that I am, she wants to push it back to sixteen—and the cycle would repeat itself until I'm thirty and over the hill. But she signed a contract."

I laugh. "An actual contract?"

Eva nods, whips out her phone from only God knows where, brings up a signed PDF file.

"Very nice," I say. "And the two steps back?"

"Being thirteen. Everything is about grades, the wrestling team, college, scholarships. I guess it's always been, but now that I'm here, it's less about *promising* to do well in school and life and all that, and more about actually *doing* well." Eva shrugs, puts her phone away. Somewhere. "Sometimes it feels like I'm an overstuffed box on moving day. It's like the bigger you are, the more responsibilities your parents try to cram into you."

"If that's the case, Ernie must be Attorney General."

We both laugh.

"What about you?" Eva asks. "You're hitting the big one-three soon. Anything special planned?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Beer, maybe."

"Beer? Really?"

"No, I just said that."

Eva smiles. “Well, we’re going to do Marco Polo in a little while if you decide to skimp properly after all.” One more glance at Ernie, a shake of her head, and she’s off, absorbed into a gaggle of girls over on the far side of the deck.

I grab a bottle of water, stand holding it, unopened, while I watch her for a moment. I watch her friends, too. Judging by their impeccable physiques and affluent demeanors, they’re more friends with Summer and Lily (who are, of course, in attendance) than with Eva—to the extent that I actually overhear one of them asking another, “Whose party is this again?” The insinuation being that they’re invited to *so* many parties they can’t keep track. Or, they’re just here because Summer paid them off, supposedly doing Eva a favor when really she’s made it *more* obvious how few friends Eva really has.

“You’re over-analyzing the situation, aren’t you?”

Mini’s worked his way out of my shorts, and is standing beside me on the pool deck.

“Who invited you?” I ask quietly.

“I’m like your wang,” he replies. “No matter where you go, there it is.”

## Show-Off

**@theo**

I blush as a random girl walks past, pausing long enough to let me know she's seen me talking to a plush doll of myself. I turn sideways, grabbing Mini and stuffing him into my pocket—

"What was that?" the girl asks.

—too late. "What was what?" I face the girl, smile uncomfortably.

"That doll you just stuffed into your shorts." She points at my unsightly thigh bulge.

Mini pokes his head out again.

The girl looks at him.

Mini leers back at her. "Want to hear a joke?"

The girl smiles cautiously. "Um...sure."

"What do me and Theo's wang have in common?" Mini grins proudly and goes rigid, stretches himself out of my pocket as far as his plushness will allow. "We're both show-offs."

And without further ado, the girl goes away. Far away. Like, down the pool deck ladder, across the lawn, and to the clubhouse, where she stands and hugs herself, shivering despite the blue-sky afternoon.

I glare at Mini, push him into my pocket.

He pops back out. "What?"

"You *know* what!" I hiss, and push him inside again.

His voice cuts effortlessly through the fabric of my shorts: "Please, enlighten me as to how any girl anywhere would ever *not* be interested in a show of genital prowess."

"Just...stay out of sight for the rest of the party, okay?"

"Fine. I'll hang here and crochet you a doily from your pocket lint, because that's *so* much more fun than actual socializing." Mini recedes into my pocket.

I go back to holding my unopened bottle of water and studying Eva creeper-style.

Ernie comes over to me. He's amassed an armful of cookies, candies, and cakes. "What was that all about?" he asks.

"I just realized something," I say.

"Huh?"

"Eva's friends aren't her friends. They're her parents' friends. They're her friends' friends—which is a paradox because none of them are her friends to begin

with."

Ernie nudges his chin against his shoulder, tries to dislodge some crumbs from his lips. "Speak the good Queen's English, white boy."

"She talks to them, hangs with them, but she only smiles or laughs when she's with us." Look. She just did a header into the deep end, climbed back out to cheers and pats on the back from everyone, and yet she seems no more pleased than if she'd opened a door in order to get from one room to another. She looks over at me and Ernie, smiles, waves briefly before switching back to placid mode. "See?"

"That's your pocket puppet talking."

I glance down, expecting to find that Mini's escaped again, but he's nowhere to be seen.

"Your donk," Ernie clarifies. "It's an evolutionary survival instinct. Your balls are pumping you full of hormones and hallucinogenic chemicals designed to eventually coerce you into pollinating the posies anywhere, anyhow. Pubertal delirium, I think it's called."

I glare at him. "That's not a thing." I hope to God it's not.

"Denial, bruh."

"Common sense—and sex-ed class."

"Whatever."

## The Gift of Presence

**@theo**

Ernie may feign ignorance, but he's got to see it, too: Eva's friends aren't her own. They've been chosen for her. I'm sure of it. Perfect little friends for her parents' perfect little girl living the perfect little life. That's why she's still a card-carrying member of the Runt Squad along with fat stuff, Jan, and myself: she doesn't *want* to be perfect. She only pretends because it's what's expected of her. I'm sure I'm sure of it.

Summer and Lily cartwheel over to the snack table.

"Hi, Theo!" they greet simultaneously.

I wave, smile dorkily.

Ernie (barely) makes room for them, takes a sloppy bite of something from his armful as he regards Summer's bikini. "Hey, Summer Vacation."

"Hello, Ernest," Summer replies, sighing. "So, what did you get Eva for her birthday?"

"I brought her the gift of my *presence*." A Twizzler dislodges itself from Ernie's armful and tumbles onto the deck.

Summer smiles, stoops, picks it up for him. Then she steps in close and, replacing the Twizzler in his armful, whispers loudly into his ear: "Listen, fat boy. I don't know what loophole you exploited to be here, but I'm on the lookout to make sure Eva doesn't fall in with the wrong crowd." She pokes his belly. Twice.

"And *I'm* here," Ernie responds, "to make sure there's always a roll of toilet paper within arm's reach of Lilypad's feral butt crack."

Lily shifts self-consciously, glancing over her shoulder in search of accidental butt cleavage.

"Apologize." Summer frowns, pokes Ernie's belly again, causing it to jiggle.

The main theme from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* escapes an open window next door. (Either someone's coincidentally watching the film, or else they stand by their window with it cued up, waiting to press play the very moment a throw-down happens.)

Ernie calmly deposits his junk food on the snack table, then waddles behind Lily, takes out his student ID, and pretends to swipe it along the length of her crack.

## The Causing of a Scene

**@theo**

Lily squeals, offended, and jerks herself out of reach.

Meanwhile, Summer's gone livid. "Ernest, when I said *apologize*, I didn't mean —"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Am I causing a scene?" Ernie grabs his stomach, makes a mouth with his fat, uses it to munch on the edge of the tabletop. "Am I *insulting* you? *Nom-nom-nom!*"

Someone's going to die in this episode—

—wait, my shirt's lifting itself.

Or, rather, Mini has climbed onto my shoulder, and is pulling my shirt up over my head in an attempt to get it off. Temporarily blinded, I grab at him, at my shirt, stumbling, twisting, wriggling, yelling: "Hey! *Stop*—"

Too late.

Off it comes, along with my hat and sunglasses.

There goes Mini, trailing my shirt behind him as he scurries across the pool deck and down the stairs.

There I am, standing bare-chested and bewildered as heads turn, mouths drop open, music stops.

Ernie's shell-shocked.

Summer and Lily merely nod at my abdomen and smile appreciatively.

## The Fat Kid at a Skimping Party

**@ernie**

I don't believe what I'm seeing.

Do *you* believe what I'm seeing?

*What the hell kind of twisted alternate dimension have I uploaded into?*

I mean, I know Theo goes to the gym everyday with his mom. He's nevertheless still the small and scrawny type, and definitely nothing to write home about. At best, he'd make a respectable non-featured *Baywatch* extra, or a cute little stuffed animal on a store shelf. But Summer and Lily are treating him like some kind of hunky beefcake. Whatever their problem was a moment ago, the girls have completely forgotten about me, and are now morphing into *chibi* versions of themselves. They float beside Theo, trailing bright red hearts in their cupcake-scented wakes.

"*Hai*, Theo!" they both coo in unison—even though they just said hello to him only moments ago.

Theo looks at me imploringly, mouths the words, "Help me."

"What the hell's your problem?" I yell at him, instinctively reaching out to flick one of his nipples—

"Hey, stop that!" he yells, and slaps my hand away. "What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me? What's the matter with *you*?"

"Nothing's the matter with me!"

The girls continue to hover, moth-like. "*Haaaiiii, Theo!"*

"Oh, something's the matter!" I exclaim. "Something's *very* the matter!"

"Why are you so upset?" Theo asks.

"Look around you, junior! I'm surrounded by gorgeous skimpers! Everyone's tight and pretty and handsome and smells nice and you're supposed to be the nerd, the little geek-boy, the awkward to my flab—my chicken-wingman! Now I'm just the fat kid at a supermodel soiree!"

Theo tries to cover up nonchalantly, every bit of him seeming to exude cuteness for the awe-inspired girls, who've gone from two to four as gradually everyone female in attendance drops what they're doing in favor of basking in the glory of the little cuddly one.

My brain can't process this...this *scene* unfolding before me. It needs sugar—*I* need sugar. I gather my snacks from the table.

"Where are you going?" Theo asks, trying unsuccessfully to extricate himself

from the gaggle of girls.

I dip my head into my armful and retrieve a madeleine with my mouth. Chewing loudly, I reply, "*Sthwimming, bithes!*"

I head for the pool.

# Paradigm Lost

**@eva**

"Here, hide this," Mini says, handing me Theo's Linux T-shirt the moment I get back to the pool deck.

"What's this?" I ask. I take the shirt.

"The final lingering embers of Theo's boyhood."

I follow Mini's gaze. I'd only left to use the bathroom, but in the minutes since the party's become lopsided (the sky's also turned frosted pink—that's another matter altogether, though), with most of the girls gathered in a tight group near the snack table and converted into...*chibis?* I try to get a peek between packed shoulders, arms, and legs. It looks like one of the boys is lying in a fetal position on the deck while the girls take turns poking and prodding him and asking what his favorite things are—wait. That's Theo. Shirtless. Darling. Darling and shirtless and *what now?*

I have to look away after a while; it's kind of messing with my head. Over on the opposite side of the deck, several of the boys (I don't know their names—they arrived as part of Summer's posse) are waiting out the huddle by taking photos of each other flashing gang signs while striking breakdancing poses. Ernie's brooding alone in his own corner of the pool. He's got several plastic plates floating around him, each one containing a hefty piling of junk food.

I climb onto the deck, pad over to Ernie, sit beside him, my legs dangling in the water, Theo's shirt bundled in my arms. "What happened to the sky?"

Ernie points accusingly across the way. "Theo took his shirt off."

"That's why the sky's pink and the girls are all cartoony and everything smells like cotton candy?"

"Uh-huh."

"But he's taken his shirt off before and nothing like this has ever happened."

"World's off its axis, Bugsy. Up is down, left is right. Group paradigm's for shiz."

We have a paradigm? "Huh?"

"Duh. Geek, jock, *gurl*, fat kid. That's the natural order of things."

"Ah."

"Now it's cutie, jock, *gurl*, fat kid. Theo's darling rack has thrown everything off balance. I've been further marginalized. Don't you feel marginalized?" Ernie pauses, realizing the candy bar he'd been nursing has fallen into the pool. Quickly, he makes sure no one (besides me) is watching, reaches into the water, grabs the

candy bar, and shoves it into his mouth. He chews loudly as he continues: "He's supposed to be the nerd, the geek, the poindexter. No one ever thought to test him out in the field. It was bad enough when he ditched the glasses, but this, *this!* Mark my words, these are dark times!"

I unfurl the Linux T-shirt. "Darling or not, I don't think we'll ever have to worry about Theo not being a nerd."

## Some Kind of Meaningful Moment

**@eva**

"Easy for you to say," Ernie mutters. "You're a girl *and* a jockette. You've got both categories to fall back on whenever your natural charm fails. What's left for me but to assume my role as the loser of the group? Fat, flabby, gelatinous me against the Czech bodybuilder, his wrestler fangirl, and the adorable computer programmer little brother."

"Why are you so upset over this? Good for Theo."

"Eves, let me tell you what birthday parties are like from a fat kid's point of view. You're alone in the middle of a crowd of people who by merely existing make it a crime to not be as beautiful as they are. You may be interesting, funny, smart as heck, good at ukulele, but fatness counts for ninety-percent of your grade. Fail that quiz, and you're expelled. That's why our gang's social ratio is so important. See, people don't hang out with you based on *you*, they hang out with you based on who's *already* hanging out with you. Or who's not hanging out with you. They see you alone—within or without a group—and they won't touch you with a ten-foot pole because they think your solitude is contagious. As if you could catch friendlessness! Seriously! It's solitude, bitches! Not ringworm! Whatever. Screw the beautiful people. I was invited to this stupid party, and I'm going to enjoy myself. It's not like any of these pert-bottomed tarts can touch any of the junk food."

Without meaning to, I find myself chuckling. "Do you really think my party is stupid?"

"Are *you* having any fun?" Ernie asks. "Be honest."

"Honestly? No." I gesture at the huddle. "These are all Summer and Lily's friends and training partners. I don't know any of them."

Ernie nods, hands me a Slim Jim. "Junior was talking like that."

I take the Slim Jim. "Like what?"

"He said all your friends weren't yours, and that you only smile when you're with us. But don't tell him I told you that." Ernie reconsiders. "Second thought, screw it. He's one of the beautiful people now. He doesn't need me or anyone else sugar-coating the truth for him."

I stare thoughtfully at my Slim Jim. I feel like we're having some kind of meaningful moment between us. I want to ask Ernie what other bits of wisdom Theo's been dispensing this afternoon, but he cuts me off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"What's the deal with Planned Parenthood over there?" he asks.

"What?"

"*That* over there. Who's *that*?"

Oh, Mia—so-and-so's pregnant older sister sitting by herself near the barbecue. "That's Mia. One of the girls brought her."

"Is she Mexican? You think she listens to *banda* music?"

"Ernie, don't you dare go with this where I think you're going."

He's not listening. He just keeps his eyes transfixed on Mia's swollen belly as, painstakingly grasping his drenched, sopping-wet bath towel in place, he snail-trails sloppily out of the pool, mumbles something under his breath that sounds like, "Flipping hell, the *real* epidemic isn't dosequisvirus, it's *El Cassetto*..."

# Fatophobia

**@eva**

Maybe it's not the best idea, but I get to my feet and follow Ernie across the deck, telling myself I'm doing so to be a good hostess when really I'm curious exactly what's going to happen—to the extent that I take out my phone (from somewhere) and launch the camera app. Just in case.

"Hey," Ernie says to Mia. A mini-waterfall gushes loudly from the bottom of his towel.

Mia, who'd been messing idly with her phone, now looks up. "Hey," she says back.

"You got a bun in that oven?" Ernie points at her belly.

"Um...what?"

"Were you listening to Mexican *banda* music recently?"

"I don't know what that is." Mia looks at me with question marks in her eyes.

I shrug and keep my phone aimed at her and Ernie.

"Oh, right," Ernie says. "You're probably white bread Mexican." He thinks for a moment; water continues to gush from his towel. "The stuff you hear playing outside Mexican grocery stores or taco trucks in the shady parts of town. Did you listen to anything like that recently?"

"Why would I?"

Ernie gets this constipated look on his face. "Does *El Cassetto* mean anything to you?"

"How does Lily know you again?" Mia asks.

"We're besties. What's your SuperMegaNet username?"

"Why?"

"I need to investigate the scene of the crime!"

"No offense, little boy, but I'm *not* adding you to my buddy list."

That look of constipation? It just went flabbergasted. "Why the hell not?"

"Because you're *weird*."

"Oh, I see how it is. You're fatophobic."

"I'm *what*?"

"You don't want to talk to me because I'm *fat*. Hang around with me too long and you'll catch my fatness like a friggin' cold, right?" Ernie holds out his arm above Mia's legs and starts scratching it profusely.

"What are you doing?" Mia snaps.

"Scratching off fat cells so that they'll nest under your skin and metastasize to

your thighs."

"*Ew!* Get away from me!"

Ernie scratches harder. "Fat! Fat! You're getting fat!"

Gripping her chair's armrests for leverage, Mia lifts one of her legs and kicks Ernie hard in the gut.

"*Gaaahh!*" he screams, stumbling backward—

—into the pool.

His soft bulk displacing a barrage of water, plastic plates, and junk food debris that rains down on everyone and everything on or near the pool deck.

Summer's Bluetooth speaker shorts out.

The sky becomes slightly less pink.

And I swear on my mother's eventual grave that, without missing a beat, she clears her throat and announces, "Okay, everyone! Time for cake!"

# All Parties End This Way

**@eva**

Ernie coughs, sputters, spits water as he bobs toward the pool steps. "Your friends are evil, Eva! *Evil!*"

I sigh, running quickly into the clubhouse and returning with a fresh towel. Ernie makes a big deal out of wringing himself dry (the more he works at it, the wetter he seems to stay—it's kind of funny, actually). Then we resume our scheduled programming, the girls, now back in non-*chibi* form, finally leaving Theo alone and herding me over to one of the tables where the cake is all lit and ready to go. On the count of three, the mob breaks into an off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday." I blow out candles. I open presents. Summer smears the tip of my nose with frosting. People take pictures. And it's all kind of...*bleh*. But I pose and dimple and laugh and thank everyone anyway. That's what you do, right? I mean, it's not like in those teen movies where there's that one drunk girl stumbling through a house party and going, "*Woooh! Partaaay!*" as she spills her drink everywhere. No way anybody has *that* much fun *ever*. Geez. I sound depressed, don't I? I swear I'm not. I'm just...underwhelmed by the logistics of birthday parties and social gatherings in general.

We play more games, take more photos, eat more food. The festivities eventually wind down. By five o'clock power hour, everyone except Theo, Ernie, and a small handful of parents have said their goodbyes and uploaded back home.

Somehow still thoroughly waterlogged despite having spent the entire afternoon in the sun, Ernie sits himself on a lawn chair at the far end of the pool deck and groans dejectedly. "Well, *that* was a disaster."

"It wasn't so bad," I say, joining him.

"The only reason I didn't leave sooner was because it wasn't power hour."

"Glad you had a blast."

Theo wanders over. He looks like he's been tossed in the dryer. His shorts are twisted and scrunched up in all the wrong places, and his windswept hair is even more tousled than usual. There's a phone number written in lipstick along one of his arms; his Dragon Ball earring is sticking out at a right angle. "Need any help cleaning up?" he asks.

Hm. I look around the deck. "Garbage duty? I'll clear, you collect?"

"Sounds good."

"Ernie, do you want to help, too?"

"Leave Ernie be." He waves me away—but notice how he's not uploading

himself home. He may be playing the misery card, but I don't think he's *truly* miserable.

Fetching some garbage bags, I lead Theo around the pool deck, table to table.

"You're awfully quiet," he says after a while.

"I'm just thinking," I reply, and dump a hefty chunk of uneaten cake into my bag.

"About what?"

"I'm another year older, another year wiser. But what have I really learned, if anything?"

"That Ernie's stomach is in fact the massive black hole thought to be at the center of the Milky Way," Theo suggests.

I laugh. "Good one."

"Thanks."

"Seriously, it hit me when everyone was singing 'Happy Birthday' and tagging me in all their photos and I was just, like, I don't care about any of this. I don't care about any of these people, and they don't care about me. I realized today that I have no friends."

The trash slumps in Theo's hands as he shifts from foot to foot, clears his throat. "You have us. You have the Runt Squad."

"Yeah. I do." I put down my dirty plates and hug the little dork. Quick, polite, but also genuine.

Lo and behold, he hugs me back.

And I get this...*pang* of something a tick more upbeat than what I've been feeling all day, something to do with warmth and friendship—

—oh, my God, is this some kind of hormonal thing?

Oh, my *God*, does this mean my first period is around the corner?

We let each other go, and I pick up the plates again, resume garbage duty.

Theo pretends to be just as busy helping out with his trash bag. Note how it's been a while since I'd given back his Linux shirt, and he still hasn't put it back on. Nor his baseball cap or sunglasses.

Ernie eventually wobbles over to us. "Hurry it up, you two. I need to get back on the prowl."

"Prowl?" I ask.

"*El Cassetto.*"

"Are you still thinking about that stupid cassette tape?"

"Am I still thinking about the sinister cassette tape stalking SuperMegaNet users, the latest of whom was a friend of a friend who attended your birthday party this very afternoon? Um, *yuh!*"

"Ernie, I told you, Mia's just pregnant."

"Yeah, but how do you *know*?"

"Because I overheard the parents talking about it earlier," I explain. "Well, it was more like her mom going on about how 'my DD made the bad decision to toss away a promising college career for a night of mediocre, forgettable sex with a boy she hardly knew.' Actually, Mia made *two* bad decisions: having premarital sex, and

coming to a party with *you*."

"*Har-har.*"

"Now, are you going to stand around the rest of the day gelatinating, or are you going to help us clean up?" I glare at several overturned plates on the deck. "Most of these are yours, anyway."

"Fine." Ernie grabs a trash bag, heads for the snack table. "I'll start over here."

Huh. I was expecting more of a fight.

Small miracles.

Theo and I resume cleaning, making our way around the pool deck. We've filled one bag, and are starting on a second when it occurs to me that Ernie's being too quiet. He's been hovering over by the snack table the whole time, not looking at or speaking to anyone—and now I know why: he's trying to scrape all the leftover snacks and uneaten cake into his trash bag. Not to throw it out, mind you, but to repurpose it as his own.

This at about the same time Mom, having seen the last of the adults off, steps onto the deck to check our progress. "Oh, my goodness!" she gasps when she sees what Ernie's doing.

He screams, grabs his garbage bag, which sags almost grotesquely in his arms as he waddles over to the guest laptop Mom set up earlier. Without so much as a goodbye nod, he uploads himself home.

Mom looks at me and Theo, thunderstruck. "Did you see that?"

I hold my head in my hands.

"That Ernest boy—he just stole all the food!"

"I know."

# Bumblefuch Sunset

**@ernie**

Tacoman's giving me major stink-eye right now. I don't even know why. So what if I've brought my desktop computer to his dinky little taco stand for late-night power hour? People bring their cell phones everywhere. Phones are types of computers. My PC is a type of computer. Why is one frowned upon while the other is universally accepted? I use my PC for all the same things you might use your phone for: games, Internet, YouTube, porn, chat. In fact, the only thing my computer can't do is make phone calls. But who in this day and age uses their phone to make phone calls? Point is, computers and phones are alike in every way except form factor. Shape. Size. *Looks*. Am I therefore to be ostracized simply because my form factor doesn't meet the self-appointed requirements of a shallow, conformist society favoring small and sexy over big and functional? I think not! Besides, I don't even own a cell phone. Theo may have defeated my grams once upon a time, but even in her present state as a cardboard cutout suspended in living death, her stranglehold on the Womack household's financials is relentless. She thinks cell phones are *excessive*, and therefore unnecessary. Gramps? He's an ill-timed fart away from senility, and is of absolutely no help in the Let's Modernize the Womacks department. So, I carry a PC instead of a smartphone. Haven't *you* ever brought your PC to a taco stand out in the middle of the Bumblefuch Desert? Haven't you ever *wanted* to?

"I used to feel a sense of security when it came to social media, Tacoman," I say, ignoring the aforementioned stink-eye and working my way through a gigantic nacho platter with my left hand while leveling up my *Hella War* barbarian character (Myron Deathkill, esquire) with my right. "With SuperMegaNet, I knew I'd never be more than a click away from my friends. I'd never be alone or snackless. But things have changed. The world's changed. It's become darker, grittier, like a Hollywood remake. All of us—you, me, the next jerk—are characters trying to grapple with the loss of our ignorance, our innocence." I scarf a particularly cheesy nacho sector and wait for spiritual confirmation.

Behind the counter, Tacoman, his usual hairy, thickly-mustached self (the Boho Mandate is a San Angelico-only kind of thing), scratches his back with a greasy spatula and points off to the side, where he's got a laptop set up. Facing the laptop's webcam is a giant handwritten sign that reads:

*The Taqueria of Lost Souls,*

*where gringos go to die—*
*SuperMegaNet users welcome!*

"You like new sign, *mi gordito*?" Tacoman asks.
So much for spiritual confirmation.

# Pontification

**@ernie**

"I went to a birthday party today," I say. "Fancy house, fancy swimming pool, fancy friends. Rich mamas with rich little boys and girls, totally sheltered from the world, totally ignorant to what's *really* going on around them."

"@evil_ernie Preaching to the choir. #SaturdayThoughts" Twitterpated declares. (Since I last visited the taqueria, he and Sexless Gamer, Stood-Up Download Dater, Facebooked, and Self-Published Author have taken over one of the small plastic patio tables flanking the taco stand. In essence, they've become an ever-present clump of lameness and despair set against an endless twilight backdrop of cactus plants and tumbleweeds, and are either scaring all of Tacoman's customers away—or they *are* all of Tacoman's customers.)

Tacoman swaps out his spatula for a rag and spray bottle. He starts wiping down the counter. "*Gringos*. Always too much money."

"I just got dumped by this girl because I wasn't competitive enough," says Download Dater. "She had to live in Irvine, no questions asked, and she expected me to pay half the rent on a three-thousand-a-month, one-bedroom apartment. I suggested somewhere cheaper, she suggested we see other people."

"People spend all their time and money searching for what they already have. #wisdom #beggaronabeachofgold #MikeAndTheMechanics"

"My first three wives left me because I never made it onto the *New York Times* Best Sellers list," mutters Self-Published Author.

"Bitches be calling me crossfat," adds Sexless Gamer.

Myron earns +3 XP for killing a garden grawk.

"My best friend is a knockout," I say.

Tacoman asks, "*Amigo es* broken?"

"All this time I thought he put the runt in Runt Squad when really he's this miniature studmuffin. He says he goes to the gym with his mom to burn off excess energy so he'll sleep better at night, but I know he's *really* doing it because he wants to show Jan up."

"Who's Jan again?" Facebooked asks.

"He's supposed to be the tall, brooding, musclebound jock of the group," I explain. "Eva wants him, Theo wants Eva. So, Theo's going cutie-pie for a chance to win an all-expenses-paid trip to her crotch. Waste of time and money. Real love is fatness. It's baldness. It's buck teeth and bad posture. It's your boyfriend or girlfriend smelling funky during nookie and you being cool with it. Not these

plastic pretty-boys and girls who spend half their days working out or grooming in front of a mirror because they think it makes them better people."

Twitterpated nods knowingly. "Looks aren't everything. #NeverJudgeABookByItsCover"

"Yeah. Take me, for example." I jiggle my fat. "I'm comfortable with who I am. If you want to love me, you've got to love *all* of me."

Subtle applause.

Then this chat window pops up on my screen:

**Darkmaster:** hey evil_ernie buddy. ready for some whoop-ass?

## Greetings From the Hellpocalypse

**@ernie**

Darkmaster's neither my buddy, nor am I ready or willing to have my butt whooped. I don't know who he is other than the fact that he's been hounding me recently to join his *Hella War* party just so he can power-level my barbarian.

**Darkmaster:** join my party bro «Click here to join Darkmaster's party»

His profile pic is of some shirtless dude wearing a 'tarded medieval helmet. Wannabe bodybuilder, judging by the overdeveloped pecs and biceps on an otherwise lanky frame—like he never got the memo that focusing on the most popular muscles and nothing else doesn't make you look cool, it makes you look like you've got tits.

**Darkmaster:** i'll go easy on you this time, promise

His deathboard ranking is Flaming Nightmare. I'm not proud to admit it, but that's way ahead of mine (currently Bloody Entrails). We're talking the Hellpocalypse campaign. You need some serious XP if you want to stay alive, let alone slay any mobs without going through half your inventory each battle. The first time I agreed to join Darkmaster's party, it was an innocent mistake. He'd told me he'd help level up my character, which was mostly true—until he'd left me to die inside a bloodfang's nest. I'd lost *so* much loot that night! Darkmaster's explanation? Goddamned chores! He'd told me he'd make it up to me. The second time I joined his campaign and he'd left me stuck at the bottom of a gingersnoot pit, I started to get suspicious. The third through fifth times were entirely my fault for trusting a stranger. There will be no sixth time. This pec-flex schlongmeister is seriously starting to cramp my style. Anyone cocky enough to pose shirtless for their profile pic is probably a douche and/or douchette anyway—or else a forty-five-year-old loser living out of their parents' basement.

**evil_ernie:** no thanks dorkmaster i've got better things to do than be cannon fodder for your sucker campaign
**Darkmaster:** aw come on don't be butt-hurt. this time will be different I promise «Click here to join Darkmaster's party»
**evil_ernie:** lick my powdered eight balls

**Darkmaster:** if you can stay alive for the whole campaign i'll give you my spare emperor's talon, maxed out. «Click here to join Darkmaster's party»

Motherflicker.

**evil_ernie:** let's roll pretty-boy

## Schlongmeister

**@ernie**

I join Darkmaster's party, deposit another handful of nacho into my mouth. Myron Deathkill drops into a hazy swamp and immediately starts losing health.

Darkmaster tosses me a share potion.

**Darkmaster:** you'll need this to keep the murk from leeching HP. as long as you're with me you'll share my health and XP

I quickly take the potion.

My HP stabilizes.

So far so good.

Still, I'm not entirely chill. Darkmaster has done this kind of thing before, gifting me with all kinds of armor and weaponry—only to drop me like a bad habit the instant it's time to throw down. That Emperor's Talon, though. If I had one of those, I'd be able to slay most non-boss mobs like nobody's business.

I follow Darkmaster through the swamp.

**Darkmaster:** you hear about asia afrodesia
**evil_ernie:** who's she banging now
**Darkmaster:** no one for a while she's pregnant

Note to self: cross singer-slut slash self-proclaimed blood metal starlet Asia Afrodesia's coin slot off my to-do list. Not that I ever would've been able to do her in the first place. She's rich, famous, fabulously-boobed and bottomed, is ten years older than me, and has had her fill of any fanboy she's ever wanted since her first hit single, "Fool Me Once, Bang Me Twice," topped the charts. She first came to my attention with the music video for "My Body Is Your Temple" (this was around the time she dyed her hair hot pink and started performing completely naked as some kind of *awesome* creative statement). There's no way on Earth I was ever going to meet her in person, much less make sweet, adulterated love to her all night long, but the optimist in me always held onto the hope that as long as she was single and childless, somehow, someway, I'd be the first to unbox her cherry. Ah, but the joke's on me. This is Asia Afrodesia we're talking about. Her cherry hasn't been in its original packaging since grade school.

**Darkmaster:** sex drugs lawsuits indecent exposure and now motherhood? poor girl can't catch a break
**evil_ernie:** cry her a river all the way to her 500 million doolar bank account
**Darkmaster:** truth. it's not like she wasn't asking for it
**evil_ernie:** who actually ASKS for a bun in their oven?
**Darkmaster:** right
**Darkmaster:** you got a girlfriend?
**evil_ernie:** had one. flying solo now don't need the drama
**Darkmaster:** same here.
**Darkmaster:** dated a smoking hot senior girl when i was a freshman, we were boyfriend girlfriend, BFFs everything rolled into one. she cheered me on at my wrestling matches, i was courtside for every one of her tennis games. SO in love right? then she dumps me on prom night for a random college dude with money and a car. broke my heart didn't have a care in the world. she blamed it on LOVE "the heart wants what it wants" but it was pure 100% biology. hormones seeking hormones. we don't want to admit it but deep down we all really know what we're doing when we do someone

Tell me your life story, why don't you?

**evil_ernie:** women
**Darkmaster:** women
**Darkmaster:** they hide their biological programming behind words like "love" and "commitment" but in the end it's all about laying pipe and making money. men and women both want the same thing, men are just more straightforward about it. women play mind games but I learned quickly.
**evil_ernie:** learned what?
**Darkmaster:** it's a bang or be banged world. i choose to bang.

Translated: he chooses to be full of poo.

**Darkmaster:** women say they want love but when you give it to them they run away. slam them rude though, treat them like garbage and they come back for more every time. ever heard of an incubus?
**evil_ernie:** that oldschool alternative band?
**Darkmaster:** no the mythological creatures the incubus and the succubus

Google me timbers.

**Darkmaster:** i realized my freshman year that's all we really are at heart, incubi and succubi who've nicknamed themselves MEN and WOMEN. i'll never be a man to any modernday woman. women don't want MEN, they want monsters. big muscles and big dongs and big money. they don't want partners they want to be TAKEN so i'll be the incubus the inseminator visiting unsuspecting virgins in

the middle of the night one supermeganet user at a time, yeah baby

A miniature mushroom cloud goes off inside my head. I swallow hard as I type out my next message:

**evil_ernie:** do you listen to mixtapes?
**Darkmaster:** dude I don't play mixtapes, I MAKE them.
**Darkmaster:** if you know what I mean.

No way. He can't possibly be talking about what I think he's talking about—

Darkmaster leaves the campaign.

I watch helplessly as Myron is stripped of his armor, his clothes, his skin and muscle until all that's left is a pile of bones surrounded by a trove of discarded items and equipment that I'll never get back again.

Fricking.

Fartmaster.

"Tacoman!" I yell.

"*Que, mi gordito?*" Tacoman asks.

"Send me home!"

"Why so soon?"

"Because I said so!" I hop off my stool, yank my PC's power cord from Tacoman's power strip. Yeah, I'm mad as hell—and yet also empowered. I may have lost my loot, but I've also gained what could be my first real *El Cassetto* lead.

Mix tapes!

Unsuspecting virgins!

Midnight inseminations!

*I'm onto you, Darkmaster!*

# Afrodesiac

**@theo**

Here's the thing about Asia Afrodesia: working on her Web site, I deal exclusively with her publicist, manager, or various lower minions communicating on her behalf. I've never met her in person, have never called or texted or even so much as e-mailed her.

That's why, during this otherwise unspectacular Saturday evening late-night power hour, I'm so utterly and completely amazed to find her now standing at the foot of my bed. Not her manager, not her publicist or the aforementioned minions, but Asia herself. In a bathrobe and smelling of cocoa butter and weed and pregnant as can be.

Asia Afrodesia.

In my bedroom.

I blink at her.

She blinks back, raises an eyebrow. "So...I'm looking for my webmaster. Theo Ivanovich."

"I'm, um, he." I pull the blanket up to my chin.

"You are?"

I nod.

"Jesus, how old are you?"

"Almost thirteen."

Asia looks distantly concerned, but recovers quickly as she shrugs, starts to undo the front of her robe. "Whatever. Let's do this."

# Breaking News

**@jan**

I've never understood why the news comes on so late. Who wants to fill their head with images and video of traffic collisions and homicides right before bedtime?

Mom and Dad, for beginnings. That's the big thing that sucks about my bed being in the living room. I have to watch what my parents watch, when they watch it. Like now: they've just downloaded from whatever friend's house or corner pub in Brno they'd spent the day at (I honestly don't know how we're making rent at this point), and are sprawled on the couch with the TV turned up full volume. They're still on Czech time. To them it's morning power hour; to me it's late-night power hour. They seem clueless that while they're *starting* their day, I'm trying to *end* mine. They probably don't even know there's a dosequisvirus epidemic going on.

*Můj bože.*

When they'd first started doing this, I'd thought it was a sporadic, accidental kind of thing—sort of like their overall parenting since becoming SuperMegaNet addicts. I'd figured if I just went to bed normally, they'd only have to glance over their shoulders and spot me with the covers drawn up and my arm thrown over my eyes to get the point and turn the TV off. Or at least lower the volume. Like any caring, reasonably aware parents.

But the news played on.

I'd tried to be more obvious, yawning, tossing, turning, going to and from the kitchen. One night I'd even wedged myself between them with bread and cold cuts, waiting to be disciplined, to be told it was bedtime on a school night. But they'd been oblivious. Worse, they'd thought I was enacting a rite of passage.

"Manling," Dad had said. "When a boy eats past his bedtime."

"Our little manling," Mom had snickered.

Then the two of them had snickered together.

So, here I am sitting slumped in my bed, back against the wall, eyelids drooping, attention wandering lazily between the TV and the outline of the backs of my parents' heads when this happens:

"*...and now breaking news out of San Angelico. Self-proclaimed blood metal slash action figure rock siren and social media starlet Asia Afrodesia is pregnant. She broke the news via @l33t_master's SuperMegaNet feed only moments ago, downloading bikini-clad into the unsuspecting fan's bedroom and posting this status*

*update:* El Cassetto *knocked me up. Congratulations on breaking the news, @l33t_master #luckylittledude #cutiepie #HeavyWiener #ElCassetto' Accompanying the post were a handful of selfies of @l33t_master and Asia throwing peace signs, making fish lips, and mocking the unborn fetus with a vinyl copy of Neil Diamond's* Lovescape*. Even more bizarre are the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy itself, which the perennially adolescent singer attributes to* El Cassetto*, an Internet meme about a cassette tape of Mexican banda music currently making the rounds via SuperMegaNet..."*

The @l33t_master standing dazed and confused beside Asia in each and every one of the selfies?

Theo.

Rubbing my eyes, I transition from bed to sofa, squeezing between Mom and Dad.

"*...Asia is one of literally thousands of victims who are blaming unwanted pregnancies on the nefarious relic medium. Due to the 'always on' nature of SuperMegaNet, it's unclear as of yet how users can safeguard themselves. Police are investigating. In the meantime, should* El Cassetto *be downloaded to your phone or computer, experts recommend that you not play the tape, but rather call the authorities immediately. Turning to sports..."*

My parents glance at me.

I glance back. For a moment I wonder if they're going to tell me to lay off SuperMegaNet for a while. That's what normal parents would do, right?

Not mine.

No, the look in their eyes isn't one of concern, it's an unspoken pact being offered by two addicts uploading their brains out on my PC day and night (power-ons permitting): *We won't talk about it if you won't talk about it.*

Well, that's the look my dad's giving me. Mom's just smirking. "No cold cuts this time?" she asks.

I get up.

"*Manling*," Dad chuckles as I return to my bed, lie sprawled on my back and staring up at the ceiling. I wouldn't say I'm team Ernie with the whole *El Cassetto* thing. It's probably a hoax, someone somewhere using the Internet to pull their prank, make their mark. I'm just...more aware of it now. Because, prank or not, if it's on the news, it *has* to be real.

Right?

My parents stay put; the TV stays on. It's going to be a rude night again. I figure, then, if I'm not going to sleep, I may as well work. Curling up under the covers, I carefully arrange the pillows. Then I pull out my phone, tap the SuperMegaNet icon on my home screen, and shoot Theo the obligatory text:

**jkounicova:** you and Asia huh?

Not waiting for a reply, I upload to my secret place.

# How I Got 500k SuperMegaLikes in One Night

**@theo**

What's it called when you've been molested, just without the actual sex part? Because I'm pretty sure that's what happened to me when Asia Afrodesia downloaded into my bedroom a little while ago. Like, she didn't touch me anywhere south of the border, but she *was* all over me otherwise, and OMFG she was just as scandalous in person as she is in her music videos.

I've been lying splayed on the floor from anywhere between twenty minutes to twenty-thousand years, but now I sit up and catch my reflection in the full-length mirror—a ruffle-haired, bedraggled reflection as curious as I am as to when and how Asia signed her name in lipstick across my chest. Once she'd stripped down to her string bikini, everything had lurched into one of those psychedelic acid trip montages you see in the movies. She'd used my phone to take more than a dozen selfies of the two of us together. Fish lips. Peace signs. Bear hugs. Wagging tongues. Devil horns. Mimed blowjobs on upthrust middle fingers (hers, not mine). That weird Neil Diamond *Lovescape* pantomime thing. At the end, right before swiping out, she'd planted a big fat wet kiss on my forehead.

"What was that for?" I'd asked, mesmerized, dazed, head spinning out of control.

"Just autographing my work," she'd replied, snapping one last pic, which, along with all the others, she'd uploaded to my SuperMegaNet feed. Then she'd handed my phone back to me, blown me one more kiss, and whispered seductively, "Send me home, Theo, baby."

Then she was gone.

And...yeah.

I sit at my desk. Check my phone. Five-hundred-thousand SuperMegaLikes—and nearly as many friend requests—for the pic of my chest and Asia's hands reenacting the cover photo for Janet Jackson's *Janet*—

"What the hell happened to you?"

I look up. Ernie's just downloaded into my bedroom. He's in his pajamas (San Angelico's Boho Mandate may require us to skimp in public, but thankfully we can wear whatever the heck we want in private) and is hefting a sleeping bag, two pairs of earmuffs, a spiral notebook, and various junk foods.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Setting up for the night." He dumps his things on my bed. "I need a super-fast Internet connection so that I can check people's SuperMegaStatus updates for any

mention of *El Cassetto*."

"Power hour's almost up, though."

"Yeah, but your phone's still got at least a few hours of juice, right? I figure I can use your fancy white-folk 50G until morning power hour."

"Ernie, I...are those honey buns?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't realize you could get them in boxes of twelve."

"You have to shop at Spendco."

"Of course you'd know that."

## Douche Supreme

**@theo**

Ernie flicks me off. Doing the lousiest of Arnold Schwarzenegger impressions, he says, "Remember how I said I was going to find *El Cassetto* and use it to knock you up first?"

I frown. "Vaguely."

"I lied. I'm going to knock up Darkmaster first."

"Who or what is Darkmaster?"

"Online nemesis. Musclebound butt-muncher who thinks he's God's gift to women, and who's at Flaming Nightmare in *Hella War*, and who may quite possibly be behind *El Cassetto*."

"How do you know that?"

"Deathboard—duh."

"No, I mean the *El Cassetto* part."

"It's called *sleuthing*. Check out his profile." Ernie grabs my phone without asking (*why* is everyone doing that tonight?) and opens a browser window, navigates to Darkmaster's *Hella War* profile page. The user photo shows this shirtless, skinny-and-yet-also-enormously-pectoraled muscle dude wearing some kind of evil dungeon master helmet. "I chatted the loser up, and he basically confessed to making mixtapes and banging the Internet."

"Wow," I murmur. "It's like he works his pecs and biceps and absolutely nothing else."

"Right?"

Taking back my phone, I study Darkmaster's profile for a moment. He seems oddly familiar—if only because he's like the million other online bros who insist on baring rack in all their photos. "This is the guy you think is somehow behind *El Cassetto*?"

"Don't let the rowdy tits fool you. If he's smart enough to dupe me multiple times in *Hella War*, he's smart enough to have wrought an evil cassette tape from the bowels of hell."

"He's wearing a helmet, and has, like, no useful details in his bio." Which is simply a random string of affirmations touting his supposedly superior physical and sexual abilities. "I bet that's not even him. I bet he scraped the pic from some dirty cam site." I think of my recent dealings with Shaka Brah. "It might not even be a dude, for all you know."

Ernie gives me this look—like he hadn't considered the possibility of deception

until now.

"That *is* what the Internet's for," I continue. "Making stuff up and pretending it's true."

"Crap. You think so?"

"I *know* so. Don't waste your time on this jerk."

Ernie rubs his chins, gazes thoughtfully into space. "Damn. I had a whole theory and everything."

Oh, God. "What theory?"

"This Darkmaster guy, whether or not he's actually a hard-bod, he's *got* to be lame-sauce and living in his parents' basement, right? No friends, no girl, no action whatsoever. So, he created this mixtape to knock up all the women he *wishes* he'd slept with."

"...and why?"

"*Duh*. Why does anyone do anything?"

"More importantly, who answers a question with another question?"

Ernie rolls his eyes. "To get a higher score. That's *why*. Whatever people do on God's green Earth, *it's to get a higher score*. It's all about points, junior. Why do you think it's called 'scoring' when you make it with a girl?"

I shrug. "I've honestly never thought about it before."

"Because you're plain yogurt. Now, pay attention. Everyone wants their score at the top of the deathboard of life. But what do criminals and creepers want *more* than just a high score? Notoriety. They want the world to *know* of their work, their wicked doings. A hint, a clue, a signature or outright manifesto. And here comes Darkmaster, a douche supreme who's had so little success with the ladies in real life that he's created a vehicle for his boner to express itself online—"

"In the form of an evil cassette tape that goes around knocking people up via SuperMegaNet," I interrupt, finishing a sentence that should never, ever be finished.

Ernie scowls at me. "Don't say it *that* way."

"What, the *real* way?"

"Short stuff—"

"The *ridiculous* way?"

# The After Is Upon Us

**@theo**

"Make fun all you want, but I'm onto this guy." Ernie starts arranging his things on my bed. "Mark my words, he'll be sorry he ever screwed over Myron Deathkill!"

"Who?"

"My *Hella War* berserker—ah, never mind. You're a Nintendo fanboy." Ernie ruffles my hair. "Nice bed head, by the way."

I swallow. "Honest, we didn't actually *do* anything."

"Wait, what?"

"Huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?"

"I asked you first."

I swallow some more. "Asia Afrodesia had me, uh, help announce her pregnancy. She's blaming it on your *El Cassetto* meme."

"Finally!" Ernie guffaws. "Some mainstream media coverage!"

My instinct is to send Ernie home as usual. This is all just a publicity stunt staged by Asia's management. I know better. I *know* I know better. But it's the what-ifs that get you. I feel like a turd nugget for even thinking this, but...what if *El Cassetto* is the real deal? I'm not so much worried about getting pregnant myself. That's silly. But what about Eva? Mom? Summer and Lily and all their gal pals? Is it colder in my room all of the sudden? Darker? Creepier?

Do I really want to be alone tonight?

My question is answered a short while later, when late-night power hour is up. My room is darkened, and I'm crammed together with Ernie in my bed. He's sitting propped against the wall with my phone and several open honey bun boxes; I'm trying to settle in for the night while quietly lamenting the invention of SuperMegaNet. And yet, despite the inherent discomfort that comes with ultra-virile cassette tapes and your fat, obnoxious friends never being more than a download away, I can't imagine life *without* SuperMegaNet. It's a double-edged sword kind of thing. For old-school kids, harm's way was outdoors, in the real world. It was in dark alleys, shady neighborhoods, tinted vans—you had to leave your parents' house to hurt yourself or get stranger danger muff crammed up your butt. For modern-day kids, it's all online. Wherever there's a wireless signal, there's a way for trouble to find you. If *El Cassetto* is real, then that means it's now

possible to get pregnant via the Internet, and if *that's* possible, what's stopping, say, the flu from going epidemic? Coronavirus? Zika? AIDS? For the first time since becoming a SuperMegaNet user, I'm scared. Like, *really* scared.

But that—and Ernie's consistent flatulence—isn't the only reason I'm lying wide awake tonight. A lot of other things have been on my mind, too. Dosequisvirus. The Boho Mandate. Growing up. At the tail end of twelve, I'm also at the tail end of being a kid. I should be excited about thirteen, fourteen, fifteen... but instead I just feel like this is the end. I can't imagine anything beyond twelve. It keeps me awake nights, the wondering what—if anything—could possibly come next? What kind of world do I fit in if not the one I've been quietly cultivating for the last decade and change? I'm on the cusp of teenagehood, and I've got absolutely no idea what's to come in the After.

I guess I kind of had that "The End" feeling at the start of the school year. Which is weird, I know. Most people would be bummed about everything staying the same, but with me it's the opposite. That's how my brain works, fretting over endings despite new beginnings. I felt like my life was ending, and that I had no business taking on what was next. Then I met and became part of the Runt Squad. Ernie, Eva, Jan, all middle-schoolers like me, all of us fast-forwarded into high school before the age of thirteen. Our guidance counselor set us up on day one with an assignment: learn five things about each other. We ended up becoming best friends. I can't imagine life without the Squad—even though right now I really, really want to be without Ernie.

In my bed.

Snacking.

Messing with my phone.

Doing God knows what.

# Butter Music

**@theo**

"Hey," Ernie murmurs, noticing I'm still awake.

I roll onto my back. "Huh?"

"How come you're not naked?"

"Why would I be?"

The light from the phone casts an unnatural glow across Ernie's face. "If I were all non-fat like you, I'd totally sleep, eat breakfast, and do laundry naked."

"Uh, thanks, but indecent exposure's not my thing."

"It's only indecent if you're fat, hairy, or old. For darlings like you, being naked is considered *art*."

"Whatever, dude." I shift onto my side.

"Hey."

And onto my back again. "*Huh?*"

"What's that noise?"

"What noise?"

"Some kind of distant opera music. You can barely hear it."

I fumble my Bluetooth speaker and portable music player from the bedside table, hold them up. "It's my bedtime playlist. 'Sirens' Whispering,' from Vangelis' *Oceanic* album."

Ernie listens for a moment, frowning. "Sounds like the theme for a butter commercial."

"Vangelis is *not* butter music." I replace the speaker and player on the table and turn back onto my side.

"Hey."

I keep quiet, hoping Ernie will get the hint.

He doesn't. "Isn't it jacked how scores of average babes are getting knocked up, and nobody gives a furk. But the instant Asia Afrodesia gets blasted in the uterus, the news media is all over it like flies on sweet. Why do we care more about our celebrities than we do about ourselves? Besides having a few extra zeroes tacked onto her paycheck, Asia's no better than you or me. Why does she get the care and concern?"

Talking into my pillow, I say, "The fact that you look down on her because she's a celebrity makes you just as hypocritical as the media looking down on the rest of us because we're *not* celebrities."

"Whatever, nerdling. Damn. Darkmaster's not replying to any of my chat

messages."

Quiet.

Still face-pillowing it, I mumble, "Hey."

"Huh?" Ernie mumbles back.

"What makes you think you can track *El Cassetto*?"

"Duh. It's mostly girls in their late teens to early twenties who're getting knocked up."

"So?"

"So, girls in that age range are *always* posting everything about their lives on social media. Geez, Theo. You'd make a really lousy stalker."

"Thanks."

"Anyway, I did some research. All the news stories report *El Cassetto* only gets it on during late night power hour. It looks like it knocks out the dudes first. Defenseless, the chicks are then knocked *up*. When they wake up the next morning, they're nine months pregnant, and *El Cassetto* is long-gone. No goodbye kiss, no farewells, not even a Starbucks gift card left on the pillow. Your average compact cassette tape is sixty to ninety minutes total length, thirty to forty-five minutes of play time per side. That's our window. Once we spot the relevant status update, we slap on our safety muffs..." Ernie holds up his earmuffs for effect. "... upload, and intercept *El Cassetto* before it has the chance to pull a disappearing act. Of course, it would save a buttload of time if Darkmaster would just *answer my messages*."

"If he's even half the mastermind you claim him to be."

"Oh, he's a mastermind all right."

"What makes you think he'll fess up?"

"I have ways of making people talk."

# Exodus

**@theo**

Groaning, I murmur, "I think I understand why you were promoted to the ninth grade early. Your middle school counselor got tired of putting in all the overtime—"

"Holy hell!"

"*Whuizit...?*"

Ernie sits up straight. "I just saw your SuperMegaFeed! Did you *bang* Asia Afrodesia?"

"No—"

"When did this happen?"

"Nothing happened—"

"Were you on top? No, wait—I bet *she* was on top, huh? Did she let you deliver inside, or did you have to leave it on the doorstep like some poor commoner—"

I press the pillow against my ears. "Talking time is over!"

"But *bruh*—"

"*Shh!*"

Silence.

Blessed, merciful silence—

"Oh, my *God!*"

"I told you, nothing happened!" I scream into my pillow. "She ruffled my hair and kissed me a couple of times and wrote her name across my chest, but that's all! It was a publicity stunt!"

Ernie's barely listening, though. "What? Oh, never mind that—listen to this status update! 'zomg—at danny's just found EL CASSETTE gonna play it for veronica'" He scrambles out of bed, spraying crumbs and honey bun boxes everywhere. "Put on your muffs, lover boy!"

"Ernie, it's late—"

"No ifs, ands, butts, or vaginas! *Come on!*"

"Nah-ah. No way. This is *your* stupid imaginary mission, not mine. When you're finished, you can kindly leave my fifty dollars on the desk."

"Fine. I'll just take this Asia CD with me—"

Wait, what?

"—even though I'm such a klutz I'll probably lose the booklet or crack the jewel case..."

I lift my head from my pillow. Ernie's standing beside my CD rack. He's got a

SuperMegaNet window pulled up on my phone, and has his earmuffs in one hand, a copy of Asia's eponymous 1982 album in the other. He wags it at me enticingly, then swipes out.

"Hey, put that down!" I yell, and spring from bed, dart over to the CD rack. I grab my phone off the floor, yell at the screen, "Darn it, Ernie! If you break my Asia CD, I'll force-feed you broccoli in your sleep!" I nibble my fingernails, torn between wanting to follow Ernie and knowing better.

I glance at the time.

It's past late-night power hour; I should be asleep already.

But Ernie has my Asia CD.

I grab the extra earmuffs and swipe out.

# The Card Game Massacre

**@ernie**

I'm standing uninvited in the middle of an un-Mandated, fully-powered bedroom strung up with Christmas lights and covered wall-to-wall with posters galore. Three Hispanic-looking high school and/or college losers—Rosie, Veronica, and Danny, judging by the conversation—are sitting at a cheap folding table. They're playing poker, I think, and are seemingly oblivious to the crappy boombox on the bedside table that's belting out rampant *banda*.

The instant I download, everyone turns and looks at me.

One of the gals gasps.

Danny raises an eyebrow. "Who're you?"

I hold up my hands authoritatively (woops—did I just drop Theo's Asia CD?) as I fumble my earmuffs onto my head. "I'm l33t_master! Remain calm! You're under the influence of *El Cassetto*!" Before anyone can react, I lunge across the bed, toward the boombox, my bulk knocking Veronica aside and causing her cards to fly every which way. "Don't worry! The muffs I'm wearing will protect me from the evil sound waves!" I eject the cassette from the boombox—

"Hey, kid!" Danny yells. "What the hell are you doing?"

—start yanking out wads of magnetic tape one giant handful at a time.

"*That's my girlfriend's mixtape!*" Danny throws himself across the bed as well, grabs me around the waist.

"Yeah!" I scream back. "The mixtape from hell!"

"Who *are* you?!?"

"I'm what happens when you blindly accept online friend requests from people you don't know!"

Rosie and Veronica, holding each other, their heads pressed together, look totally shocked as they watch me and the Danster wrestle for *El Cassetto*.

"Do *you* know who he is?" I hear Veronica ask.

"He's not l33t_master," Rosie replies. "That's for sure."

"You mean that kid who made it with Asia Afrodesia?"

"Um...yeah. He sent me a friend request, and I kind of sort of added him."

"Why in the world would you do that?"

"I thought maybe he could hook me up with an autograph from Asia or something." Rosie frowns. "Except this isn't him at all."

"He looks like Super Porky's son."

"Super Porky has a son?"

Danny tries to put me in a headlock.

I don't know how to fight, but I *do* know how to flail—and flail I do, my excessive weight at long last being applied effectively to a real world scenario. Translated: my fatness causes the bed to jiggle just enough that Danny can't get a firm grasp on my Jell-O rolls.

"You're crazy, kid!" he shouts.

"Let me go!" I shout back. "That tape is evil! It has to be destroyed before everyone gets pregnant! *I have to win a bet!*"

# l33t Arrival

**@theo**

Downloaded.

Looking and feeling absolutely ridiculous in my earmuffs.

But Ernie looks even worse. Tangled up in magnetic tape, he's doing some kind of overturned beetle impression while this older college dude tries to subvert him.

I wave uncertainly at the girls. "Uh...hi."

One of them blushes and covers her mouth. "OMG—it's l33t!"

"You know me?"

"*Everybody* knows you!"

Well, crud.

Ernie smiles crazily at me, continuing to struggle in his opponent's grasp. "Oh, thank God—my friend's here! He can back me up! Tell them about *El Cassetto*, Theo!"

The older dude goes still, glares up at me. "You know this lunatic?"

I smile uncomfortably.

The girls continue to hold each other.

I ask sheepishly, "Um...have any of you seen an Asia CD?"

## Broken Asia

**@mini**

When you wake up to find your boy-meat's returned from a late-night upload that he didn't bother telling you about: Theo and Ernie sit side by side on the floor in the darkness, leaning against the side of Theo's bed. Ernie has a black eye, a cut on his forehead, and is possibly missing a tooth; Theo's sulking up a storm, arms folded, chin tucked against his chest, a broken Asia CD in his lap.

I climb out of bed, sit on the floor beside him, waiting for an explanation.

"I can't believe that dude beat the stuffing out of a couple of kids," Ernie says after a few minutes.

Theo continues to sulk.

"That's child abuse, you know. We should *so* call the police and tell them he tried to touch our wieners."

Theo sulks some more.

"Too bad it was just a lame ol' mixtape. I really thought we'd found *El Cassetto*, bruh."

"You owe me fifty dollars," Theo murmurs, "and a new Asia CD."

# It's Probably Nothing

**@beta**

Yeah, so, I haven't been around much lately. The rolling power-ons have kind of cramped my style in that I can only come out and play when the juice is on and the Wi-Fi is proliferate. Drawbacks of being virtual. It's not so bad, though. When your hard drives spin down you're basically on pause in a deep, dreamless sleep. Teenagers do it all the time, crashing for long stretches of day and night, and only waking now and then to eat, crap, bang, or shower. I don't mind being on pause. It's the idea that one day my hard drives might not spin back *up* again afterward that bothers me. But I guess we all entertain the darkness from time to time.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency," I say, doing the Doc from *Star Trek: Voyager* as I download into Theo's bedroom. "What's on your mind, little dude?"

"It's probably nothing," he says, "and I feel like an idiot for asking, but..." He'd been sitting at his desk; now he turns to me with a super-cereal look on his face. "Is *El Cassetto* a real thing?"

"*El Cassetto?*"

"You know, the Mexican *banda* cassette tape meme or computer virus or whatever it is downloading itself into people's bedrooms via SuperMegaNet? Is it real, and can you actually get pregnant after listening to it?"

"You'll have to excuse my not keeping up with the times. I'm only conscious for four hours a day, max, thanks to the power outages."

"Oh. Right. Um..." Theo blushes. "Well, that's basically what it is. A lot of people are talking about it online and in the news. Asia Afrodesia's blaming her pregnancy on it."

"Asia's *pregnant*? How long have I been out of the loop?"

"I kind of feel the same way."

I shake my head, think out loud for a moment: "So, basically, an unsolicited object is downloading automatically and is applying a persistent effect while actual?"

"Supposedly."

Huh. Is that a distant gaze on my face?

Is that my virtual heart skipping a beat in my virtual chest?

"I'll ask around," I tell Theo, and I upload back home—but I don't stay home. Instead, I go to see an old friend.

I go to see Val.

# Making Old Friends

**@beta**

"Hey," she says, pretending she's not surprised to see me.

"Hey," I say back.

"Long time no see."

"Long time." I glance around the inside of her van. Lots of bright wood and potted ferns and a colorful, shagedelic throw rug. There's also a desk and a small kitchen area complete with cupboard and hotplate. Val's sitting cross-legged on the twin-sized bed in the wayback. She's got her laptop propped on one knee. Theo wasn't kidding when he'd told me she'd gone seventeen-year-old boho Blaze Masterson. I'm already missing her—*his*—ex-favorite skin, a yoga-fit, bikini-bottomed twenty-something Latina. "Boho culture, huh? As in the steampunk of fashion?"

Shaka Brah closes his laptop, gets to his feet. He instinctively starts coming in for a hug, but switches to a fist-bump at the last second. "You can't tell me it doesn't make spending time in the San Angelico area more convenient. You're looking good, by the way."

"Thanks."

"Kind of an Asian stud thing going on?"

"A little something I cobbled together."

"No complaints from me. So, we're talking again?"

I shrug. "Just dropped in to say hello."

"Took you long enough. How's Puck?"

"Who?"

"Your black and white jungle friend."

Oh, right. The little dude. "He's good."

Shaka Brah nods. Waits.

I smile. He never was a fan of small talk. "You're not still running with the metaphysics crew, are you?"

"Me? I'm solo as Han. Same as you these days. Why?"

"Something about a cassette tape of Mexican *banda* music." I head to the front of the van, setting myself in the driver's seat and pretending to admire the golden wheat field horizon beyond the windshield—though really I'm keeping an eye on Shaka Brah as much as he's keeping an eye on me. I don't think we outright mistrust each other. It's just been so long since we hung out together...we're like new jeans, you know? "*El Cassetto*. Puck and his friends are talking about it

making the rounds via SuperMegaNet. Peeps are getting pregnant. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Shaka Brah sits beside me in the passenger seat. "Should I?" He looks genuinely curious.

"Just asking."

"You think it's one of mine, don't you?"

"I never said that."

"But you came *here* to ask about it. You came specifically to *me*." Shaka Brah folds his arms. "You really think I'm using a cassette tape of Mexican *banda* music to get people pregnant? Are you hearing yourself?"

Yeah, I am, and I sound ridiculous. I know that. But how ridiculous was it twenty years ago to entertain the notion that one day we'd be uploading and downloading ourselves to phones and computers around the world—*just like we're doing today?* Besides, I promised Theo I'd ask.

Changing the subject, I say, "I hear you've been trying to get a hold of me."

Shaka Brah nods. "Rumor has it you've got a backdoor."

"Rumor has it George Lucas' hair is powered by the Force."

"*Do* you have a backdoor?"

So that's it. He's looking for an in. Maybe he's also vaguely interested in how I'm doing, but mostly he's after a way back onto the Taurus Labs servers. "I've been...locked out."

"Really?"

"The person who kept my passwords current hasn't updated me in a good long while. Maybe Taurus Labs fired them, or someone offered them a better deal. Or maybe they're simply tired of the risks. Bottom line, it means no more poking around the Taurus servers at my leisure. Also, I have no more cloud backup there. For the past few months I've been existing solely on a pile of hard drives in a, uh, friend's bedroom."

Shaka Brah looks away. "Is that wise?"

"Probably not."

"Ever consider torrenting yourself?"

"I tried that once. I'm not popular enough for people to seed me. Besides, I'm not sure I want to risk that some or eventually all of me will end up on the computers of my enemies. I just...I thought you ought to know that's why I haven't been in touch lately."

"Geez," Shaka Brah says, smirking, "you act like you're all *America's Most Wanted*."

"If Taurus' legal department, the US military, patent trolls, and the human rights activists yipping at my heels isn't enough to put me on a list, I don't know what is."

# Semi-Persistence

**@beta**

"Oh, stop. They're not *all* after you."

"They weren't before. But now, ever since..." I sigh, a years-old scolding escaping my mouth: "You shouldn't have done it, Val—er, Shaka Brah."

"I shouldn't have done what, exactly?"

"You know. *It*. Persistent skinning, making the virtual actual and all that."

Shaka Brah frowns. "This again?"

"This again."

"If we hadn't leaked the code, no one would have. SuperMegaNet wouldn't exist except for the one-percenters. And you'd be bit-rotting on some dusty old rack in the back of a warehouse."

"Probably true. But...the code still needs testing before we drop it into userland."

"The code *always* needs testing. Meanwhile, time passes and nothing ever gets done." Shaka Brah looks at me. "At what point do we simply get on with it?"

"When the app's good enough that it no longer loses users' bytes on a whim, or accidentally skins people randomly during a routine upgrade. The world already has enough Apples and Microsofts."

Shaka Brah smiles wistfully. "You've grown complacent in your old age."

"I've grown more...*cautious*," I correct.

"I thought you wanted this. An open, connected, and completely customizable world—'ultimate collaboration, man!'"

"I do, but when the code is ready and the time is right, and *not* as pre-release software that may or may not work as intended for unsuspecting users."

"There's no such thing as perfect, Beta. There's only good as can be."

"The world's not ready for this."

"*You* aren't ready."

"There may be some truth to that," I say. "I chose to beta-test SuperMegaNet on myself. I did *not* choose to go full-time virtual. Happy accident or not, it was still an accident. I don't want to live my life, virtual or actual, knowing that other people's accidents could've been prevented if I'd only waited a little while longer."

"How little of a while? Another few months? A year? Long enough for you to be deleted and for me to be thrown in prison?" Shaka Brah thumps his chest, gestures at my torso. "Look what your 'accident' has done for you. For me. I'm finally represented on the outside how I feel on the inside, and I'm living the life

I've always wanted because of it. You've cheated death, beaten MS, even if you're only semi-persistent at the moment. If we hadn't stopped waiting for all those little-while-longers, you'd still be stuck in your wheelchair."

"Shaka—"

"A useless invalid."

"Shaka Brah—"

"A shriveled waste of a human life—"

"*Valentina.*"

He stops. "*Simon*."

This must be serious—we've switched to using our default names. "I just think we—and by that I mean *you*—need go slower. Liberate the code—*when it's ready*—instead of just screwing Taurus over the first chance you get."

"Why not?" Shaka Brah lowers his gaze. Softly: "They screwed you over."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your little uploading accident may not have been such an accident."

## Mismatched Ideals

**@beta**

I pretend that I haven't just been caught off guard.

"Oh, Simon," Shaka Brah says. "They needed a guinea pig. You were young, single, fading fast. You had nothing to lose. You were a proof-of-concept."

"How do you know that?" I ask quietly.

"You didn't?"

"I knew," I say, covering quite shabbily for the fact that I *didn't* know. If it's even true. To quote the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, "Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man."

Shaka Brah sighs. "Whatever."

"*El Cassetto* is still a problem."

"Huh?"

"The Mexican *banda* cassette tape making the rounds. You know, my opener a little while ago."

"Oh, that. I'll look into it." Shaka gets up, brushes past me, steps into the kitchen nook. He fills a kettle with water. "Tea?"

"No thanks."

He sets the kettle on the hotplate. "It's probably some script kiddie marking their territory. The pregnancies? Hoaxes. Or a living meme, or mass hysteria. And it's '*El Cassette*,' by the way."

"No, it's '*El Cassetto.*' That's how the Internet is spelling things these days."

Shaka Brah laughs. I still want to call him Valentina. It's weird seeing him like this. We'd almost-dated during our entire tenure at Taurus Labs. He'd never seemed quite comfortable in his default skin back then. He does now. I get the feeling he'd be confident enough to finally go steady with me. But he'd have to be Shaka Brah to do it. Alas, I'm not into dudes, and as hard as it had been when we'd both been default, it would be infinitely more difficult now with a thirty-something woman deepfaking as a teenage boho boy.

That's the trouble with skinning: sometimes another person's ideal isn't your own.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask, swiveling in the driver's seat and watching Shaka Brah make tea.

"I'll poke around the Interwebs," he replies, "see if I can't turn over a few stones, sniff a few packets."

"I meant the code-liberating thing."

"The longer we wait, the more security updates get installed, and the harder it is to get our plans off the ground."

"So we hack our way back in."

"Yeah, but why make it harder than it has to be?"

"Just...hold off."

"Is that another little-while-longer I hear?"

"Just wait." I swipe out.

Not before Shaka Brah whispers, "Clock's ticking, Simon."

# Paperback

**@eva**

Have you heard of paperback books? They're like ebooks except actual, as in printed on *paper*. Mom got me one for my birthday. A cheesy romantic comedy. Don't tell her I said so, but I'm kind of enjoying it. The story, yeah, but also the smell and feel of the paper, the crisp, high-res type, the absence of any and all notification pop-ups. Multitasking on your phone is no big deal. But with old-school books you can just *read*, and it's kind of fun.

That's how I'm doing it, sprawled out on the floor of my bedroom during Sunday night power hour—when all of the sudden Ernie's standing over me.

"What's up, Bug Eyes?" he falsettos (I guess because that's what he thinks I sound like?), clutching a sleeping bag, earmuffs, spiral notebook, some honey bun boxes—

"*Eeek!*" I scream, and jump to my feet, quickly dart into the garden of puppetry that is my *The Nightmare Before Christmas* collection.

Ernie looks flabbergasted. "What's with *you*?"

"I'm in my underwear!"

"Your point?"

"Um, that I'm *in my underwear*."

"We're living in the SuperMegaNet age, sweets," Ernie says. "I see you in your undies all the time, and I've lived to tell about it."

"It's still inappropriate!"

"Couldn't give a damn. More importantly, I find you physically grotesque, what with those enormous bug eyes and totally flat rack, the zero hips and butt with absolutely no hint or suggestion whatsoever of at least the slightest bit of impending womanhood—"

"Enough. I get it." I come out of hiding, go over to the dresser and take out a tee and a pair of shorts. I already know it's technically not boho, so don't bother pointing that out. *Everyone* cheats behind closed doors. Those who say they don't are lying. And anyway, it's not *mandated* that you skimp in private, it's only *recommended*. I put on the tee and shorts; I'm both relieved and vaguely disappointed that Ernie's paying me no mind as he begins setting himself up at my desk. "You know I don't like it when you download into my room unannounced. What if I'd been completely naked?"

Ernie scowls. "Then I'd be needing some emergency eye surgery right about now."

# The Valley Girl Quota

**@eva**

I sigh, turning on the TV so that my parents will think it's the news people talking and not me and Ernie. "What happened to your face?"

Ernie touches his black eye, checks the Band-Aid on his forehead. "I had a run-in with some Mexican hoodlums while tracking *El Cassetto* last night."

I stand behind him, hands on my hips. "I appreciate that you want to include me in your little playtime activity, but you can't stay here."

"I'm not *staying* here. I just need a partner with whom I can coordinate a strategic search. I'll be a couple hours, max."

"Correction: you just want to use my phone because you don't have one of your own."

"Bingo was his name-o."

"Uh-uh. I'll have no part of your stupid bet against Theo."

Ernie looks disappointed. "Aw, you never want to do anything together anymore. I'm beginning to feel like you only hang out with me at school to fill some kind of valley girl quota."

"I'm *not* a valley girl!" I yell, immediately cupping my hands over my mouth. Whispering, I repeat, "*I'm not a valley girl."*

Ernie points at my letterman jacket, which is draped over the back of my desk chair. "You're on a sports team? You own a Letterman jacket? You're a valley girl."

"*Ugh*. It's like I'm talking to a cream puff with eyes..."

"Hey, I resemble that."

"Even if I let you stay here—which I'm definitely *not*—how does that help you find your cassette tape thingie?"

"Online steak-out. Scanning people's SuperMegaFeeds. If I spot any suspicious activity, I immediately upload and investigate."

I frown. "But you can only upload to people on your buddy list."

"That's why we'll be blanketing SuperMegaNet with friend requests."

"*What?"*

"Yep. Everyone and their dead grandmother will be on your buddy list. Friends for days. Now, would you prefer I start on your computer until power hour is up, and then switch over to your phone, or should I just skip computer and go directly to phone?"

# Late-Night Bodybuilder

**@jan**

*Fifty-eight…fifty-nine…sixty.*

Triceps done.

Grabbing my dumbbells, I sit at the edge of my bed, start on my biceps next. Not that I have to. When Beta augmented my missing bytes, he hard-coded my muscle build into the skin itself. As long as I've got my phone on and/or am near decent Wi-Fi, the bod will be stylish regardless of whether or not I've been working out. My concern is that if and when I find my missing bytes, I'll be soft-boiled on going fully actual again. If that's even how this works. Better safe than sorry. And anyway, there's something therapeutic about repeatedly lifting a heavy object. It's… familiar. Comforting. It'll keep my parents from suspecting anything's wrong with me. I still haven't told them about my missing bytes. I don't know that I ever will. I'm fine with them ignoring me as if everything's normal, me all tucked away safe and sound in my corner of the living room, no computer, no smartphone (that they know of), no running around town…or uploading to my secret place…at all hours of the night.

On with my workout. I'm finishing a set of shoulder presses when I spot Ernie downloading beside my bed. He's got junk food and sleepover stuff with him, and he looks flabbergasted.

"I didn't take forever to download!" he exclaims. "Since when did your dirty Czech Internet connection join the twenty-first century?"

I continue working my dumbbells. "You're interrupting my power hour, leviathan."

"Bug Eyes kicked me out. Need a place to crash while I stalk *El Cassetto*."

"How about your own room?"

"Good one." Ernie dumps his crap on my bed and opens a fresh box of honey buns.

"I thought your grandparents put a lock on the fridge."

"They did…once."

"Please tell me you're not making deals with Robbie again."

Ernie inhales an entire bun. "In the words of San Angelico's most recently knocked-up celebrity-slut, Asia Afrodesia, 'Just because cocaine is illegal doesn't mean you can't still get some.'"

No commentary.

## Extra Mass

**@jan**

I finish my set and go for a shower, hoping Ernie will be gone by the time I get back. Atlas, he's settled himself and his mess on my bed: laptop, junk food, a couple of pairs of earmuffs, bunches of wadded-up notebook paper littering the area around his sleeping bag. Great, I think to myself. The one night Mom and Dad aren't out here watching the news, and Ernie has to drop in and spoil the mood.

"Where'd you get the laptop from?" I ask, sitting at my desk.

"On loan from Theo's closet. He's got a dozen of these in there. The box was marked 'Web Testing,' but I think he's just a closet hoarder." Ernie snorts. "Get it?"

"Yeah," I lie.

"He hoards in secret, and also uses his actual closet—*get it?*"

"I get it."

"Anyway, he had this LTE USB stick in there, too, so even after power hour is up I can stay online until the battery dies or his data runs out, whichever comes first."

I unlock my phone and text Theo:

**jkounicova:** hey
**l33t_master:** What's up?
**jkounicova:** i've acquired some extra mass
**l33t_master:** Let me guess. Ernie?
**jkounicova:** blackjack
**l33t_master:** You mean "bingo."
**jkounicova:** right
**jkounicova:** he's really taking this cassette deal seriously
**l33t_master:** Yeah.
**l33t_master:** Crazy.
**jkounicova:** you think he's right?
**l33t_master:** Even if he is, don't let him fool you. He doesn't care about the people getting pregnant. He just wants attention. As soon as he realizes that we all know how full of noxious gasses he is, he'll shut up about the whole thing and go back to being his regular fat self.
**jkounicova:** any idea how I can speed up the process?

**l33t_master:** Try a cupcake and a bear trap.

## Sleeping With Jan

**@ernie**

If you think about it, Jan's shoebox apartment is the perfect place to crash. Technically, his parents live here—on paper. But they don't *live* here. They're always away doing whatever it is shifty Czech parents do when neglecting their children. If Theo were around, he'd be bent over the fact that Jan's parents are MIA. But we all have to lose our parents sometime, whether it's to our college years, old age, cancer, bad buffet. There's a point in our lives when Mommy and Daddy are no more. I lost mine in a freak Wal-Mart stampede. Janny Boy lost his to SuperMegaNet. Yet neither of us have completely *lost* anything so much as we've *gained* the experience of being parentless. When we turn eighteen and are kicked to the curb the very next day, we'll *already* know what it's like to be on our own. We'll bypass that whole late-teens, early-twenties homesick phase where we move out of our parents' place, back into our parents' place, out of, back into, out, in, out in, all shaggy and unshaven and clueless as to how a washing machine or dishwasher or microwave oven works. I feel sorry for Theo and Eva, with their superficial somas, sprawling homes, bulging bank accounts...they have *so* much to lose in a crisis. Me and Jan? You can't lose what you never had.

(No, I'm not crying. That tear trickling down my cheek? That's sweat brought on by the Kounicovas' lack of reliable air-conditioning. Screw you.)

Point is, we have the pad all to ourselves. Hell, if I wanted to, I could probably whip off my jammies and light my farts on fire. If I wanted to.

"Have you blown the case wide open yet?" Jan asks, his beady little eyes gleaming in the light of Theo's laptop as he settles into bed with me.

"*Har-har*," I reply. "You're *so* witty."

"Thank you."

"And for your information, I think we need to change our approach."

Jan closes his eyes, curls up on his side, facing away from me.

"We need to be more preemptive."

"Mm-hm."

"Become the hunters instead of the hunted."

"*Ano*..."

I pay him an irritated glance. "Jan? *Jan?* are you listening?"

He starts snoring, asleep.

Jesus, it's a wonder he ever stayed awake long enough to cross the border.

## Caught

**@ernie**

It's hardly worth the effort, but I put a pair of muffs over Jan's frizzy head. Then, full of purpose and with the power of a half-dozen honey buns flooding my veins, I surf the information superhighway, my digital maw missing nothing and no one.

Tweets.

Timeline posts.

Feeds.

**evil_ernie:** lets game biznatch

Stories.

Status updates.

**evil_ernie:** where u at
**evil_ernie:** daaarkmaaaaaasteeerrrr

Fails.

Food porn...

...porn porn...

**evil_ernie:** can u send?

...cat memes...

**evil_ernie:** sas going sup

...something on *The Daily Angel* Web site about Asia Afrodesia deciding to name her forthcoming baby l33t_master, after "the only man who could ever *really* rock my world..."

...lumberjack...sawing wood...

...lousy Czech...can't burn the midnight oil for crap...

...I'll show him...how it's done...sleep is for...the dead...

...*blink-blink* go my eyelids...

...Jan's gone...muffs half-tucked under his pillow...sneaky creeper. Probably...on

the toilet or...rubbing one out...flexing to his own reflection...bathroom mirror...

*Blink-blink.*

...is that...*banda* music...coming from...next door? Geez...Jan's walls are made of *papier-mâché*...I may as well be wearing a sombrero and chugging tequila right along with...whatever jerk-wad thinks it's cool to blast their lame tunes...dead of night...

...Rod Serling...narrating...*The Twilight Zone*...starring me:

*Ernest Goodale. Thirteen years old. Asleep in his best friend Janny Boy's twin-sized, bargain basket bed and completely unaware that on the other side of the* papier-mâché *separating the Kounicovas' apartment from the neighbor's, the play button has been pressed on a very special sort of cassette player, a player that to all outward appearances is ordinary and unspectacular, but can, in fact, only be found in...*

*...the Twilight Zone.*

*Blink-blink.*

Huh.

It's morning.

I can tell because all of the sudden Jan's living room window has brightened several shades. That and there's this gnarly thread of drool hanging from my open mouth that's creating an epic wet spot on Theo's laptop keyboard. Jan himself is still MIA, but whatever. I yawn, spread out in bed, grasp my belly instinctively—wait a sec. Why is there *more* of me than usual? I glance down at myself. My usual charming rotundness has somehow been amplified overnight.

I look pregnant.

I *feel* pregnant.

*Holy crap—*

"Damn you, *El Cassetto!*" I scream, just like Charlton Heston (and the thousands of actors who've mimicked him) in *Planet of the Apes*. I fumble frantically, my brain urging me to get out of bed, Wiki "morning sickness," and send myself home, all at once. An instinctive double-click of Theo's name on my SuperMegaNet buddy list wins out in the end—Theo, the Smart One, my rock, my personal genius grounded in reason and logic and various higher maths—

—Theo, who's at this very moment lying in his bed, the covers tossed aside, legs splayed, hands grasping desperately at something ominous and blindingly grandiose that's sprouted mightily from between his legs—

We make eye contact in the morning light.

Horrible, horrible eye contact.

I don't know what's happening.

I don't know what's going on.

What kind of twisted, exaggerated alternate dimension have I sidestepped into?

Me and junior scream in unison.

Right before he grabs his phone and swipes me the hell out.

# Paused

**@theo**

In which boxer shorts are repositioned and blankets are yanked up to quivering chins and ZOMFGs are huffed over and over inside short-circuited heads overwhelmed by terror and embarrassment—

—CBT, Theo.

Remember to breathe.

What just happened?

Did he see me?

So what if he did?

Does he know what I was doing?

So what if he does?

He does it, too.

Everyone *does* it.

What if he tells the others?

So what if he does? Nobody believes his nonsense anyway, why would they start now?

*Everyone does it!*

I huddle without moving a muscle, the blood pounding in my ears.

Mini pops his head out from underneath the blanket. "Hey, why'd you hit pause?"

I bite my lip. "Ernie was here."

"I thought I smelled cookie crumbs."

"He saw me, uh..."

Mini climbs out, settles on one of my knees. "Oh, is that all?"

I try to laugh; the sound dies at the back of my throat.

"So what?"

"He *saw* me."

"Yeah, yeah, your bud caught you playing with your joystick. Again, I ask you, so what?"

"He saw *everything*."

Mini waves one of his mitts. "Milestones. You've made several this weekend. You took your shirt off in front of a crowd of cute girls, selfied with a sexy blood metal singer babe, and flashed your crotch to your best friend. All completely normal and unavoidable tendencies."

"Firstly, *you* took my shirt off."

"And *you* could've tried harder to get it back. But you didn't."

"I didn't want to draw even more attention to myself!"

"Says you." Mini looks me in the eye. "Why are you *really* upset?"

As usual, it occurs to me that I'm talking to a plush doll, but I *do* want to answer the question—if only to get it off my chest. "I guess I don't want people to think differently of me."

"What people?"

"I don't know. People."

"What, the rest of the Runt Squad? Kids at school? Random strangers you pass on the street?"

"Anyone. Everyone. I don't want people to know that I'm...I'm..."

"That you're growing up?" Mini scoffs. "We all do it, Theo. We all get *caught* doing it. No big deal."

It takes me a sec to find the right words. "I guess it's all the attention. As a kid you're pretty much ignored and free to do as you please. But as a teenager, people start...judging you. Expecting things from you."

"Peter Pan never grew up, and look where it's gotten him. Creepy little sprite who flies through kids' bedroom windows, and who hasn't had a single Hollywood reboot since *Hook* in 1991. And don't say *Finding Neverland*, because that doesn't count."

I frown at Mini. "I don't want to physically remain a child. That's silly. I just don't know how I'm going to handle all the complexities of being an adult."

"Complexities, sure, but good stuff, too. Driving. Booze. Sexual congress."

"I'm not interested in any of those things."

"Oh, you're very interested in at least *one* of them."

I say, "I guess I don't like how society treats its adults. Everyone cares for you when you're a kid. They like you, they love you, they want to help you any way they can. Then you turn eighteen and all of the sudden you're on your own. Nobody gives a crap if you live or die. You see a homeless guy on the street, and you assume it's his own fault he's where he's at. You don't give him any money or ask if he's okay—you shake your head and move on. But a homeless child, oh, my God, get them food and shelter and school supplies, shower them with love and affection. If adults treated each other like they treat kids, the world would be a much better place. But they don't, and it isn't, and I feel like I have no choice. I'm growing up, and once it becomes obvious to everyone, I'll be...lost forever."

"The world's a crazy place," Mini says. "The one-percenters reap the bounty while the ninety-nine fight over table scraps. Hitler gets immortalized in history books, but the inner-city schoolteacher lives and dies with little more than some photos in a few yearbooks lost in the backs of dusty closets. The world cares about its monsters, its dictators, mass murderers, psychopaths, martyrs. Nobody gives a watery fart about what you do with your dong on a Monday morning."

I laugh. "That's...good to know."

We both laugh.

And I'm actually relaxing a bit. I'm actually...okay with myself for the time

being. “Thanks, Mini.”

“You’re welcome. Now...Rose Tyler skinny-dipping.”

“Huh?”

Mini nods at my crotch. “A little prompt that you might finish what you started.”

# Thrailkilled

**@thrailkill**

Christ almighty, look at the size of my inbox. What's wrong with kids these days? Daddy issues. Anger issues. Still wets the bed. Suicidal tendencies. Overachiever. Underachiever. If only the little bastards realized how unbelievably well off they are. Unlimited access to all the drugs, novelty, and apps they could ever want, and for all that modern privilege has given them, today's youth are still lonely, anxious, unfulfilled. Someone forgot to send them the memo that it's not enough to have something if you're not better for it. Take my third ex-husband, for example. Hung like the dickens, but had the technique of a turn signal. My fault for seeing potential that was never there to begin with. Likewise, shame on today's parents for putting so much weight into thousand-dollar cell phones and boundless data plans. Just because our kids are armed with the latest technology doesn't mean they're not bored out of their ever-loving minds due to an overabundance of *having*. I've cruised the hallways between classes. I've attended Taco Tuesdays in the cafeteria. I've overheard the conversations, the snickered vows to get this or that male teacher fired as part of some kind of darling conformist rape victim pact. Pity you poor lasses who really *do* inherit such a despicable fate because the staff no longer believes a word out of your pretty little cry-wolf mouths.

Hence, here I am ringing in the start of a new day staring at a stack of absentee sheets and counseling appointments for Boca Linda girls who've suddenly turned up pregnant this week—who've suddenly decided to *claim* they're pregnant this week.

I get paid either way, my lovelies.

A fresh pack of cigarettes, the flick of a lighter, the crackling of fresh, tar-infused tobacco embers, the embrasure of smooth, rich nicotine, and unto this Monday morning I go, settling into the murky depths of my virtual office. Budget cuts have relegated me to working from an online server as of late. I was resistive to the idea at first (more so recently when a student accidentally uploaded to my personal *Puck Martin* server), but the infernal SuperMegaNet tech has grown on me, what with customizable furniture, wallpapers, and the ability to smoke virtually a quantity of cigarettes that would outright kill me actually. The marvels of this modern world in which we live—

—what have we here?

Do my eyes deceive me, or is that...

...an audio cassette revealing itself through the parting haze?

## Without Whom

**@theo**

Jan grins at me as I take a seat at our usual table outside the giant gingerbread house that is 3 Hags' Doughnuts. "I saw you on the news over the weekend."

"You did?" I ask, swallowing hard and loud, and vaguely recalling having received a text from him implying as much.

"Asia Afrodesia's pregnancy announcement. That *was* your bedroom, right?"

Suddenly grateful that I brought along my laptop, I open it and hide myself behind the ginormous screen. "Oh. Um...that. Yeah, I guess."

"Being a webmaster looks like fun."

"It's, um...interesting." I'm cringing, but I'm also secretly more okay with talking about Asia rather than what I'm ninety-nine-percent sure Ernie caught me doing in bed this morning. I'm still hyper-aware of everyone and everything around me, as if I've got some misplaced lock of hair or ruffled piece of clothing giving away my personal private bedroom activities. But of course that's ridiculous. And Jan is his usual detached self, absorbed in his phone, scratching offhandedly at one of several Band-Aids on his arms. I'm pretty sure he doesn't care as much as I think he does about what I do with myself behind closed doors.

Eva downloads after a few minutes, sparkles briefly in the dinnertime power hour light as she sets down her spray bottle and takes a seat. "You're sporting new threads," she says to Jan.

Huh. I hadn't even noticed that he's ditched his flimsy surgical number for a chic-looking designer Speedo. And a chain necklace.

"Dollar store sale," Jan explains. "My parents went wild."

Eva looks at me. "So, where's fat boy? Usually he's a couple bear-claws toward a diabetic coma by the time I get here."

"*I* definitely haven't seen him," I answer just a little too defensively.

"He wasn't at school today, either. Did you hear that ruckus this morning?"

"What ruckus?" asks Jan.

"I'm not sure. I just remember waking up and hearing Ernie screaming, 'I'm pregnant! He's got crotchfire! Oh, the humanity—*my eyes are bleeding!*'"

"I must've been out."

Eva waits expectantly.

"Beats me," I say, and shrug oh-so-suspiciously. "I never understand half of what comes out of Ernie's mouth." For good measure, I nod casually at Jan's various Band-Aids and ask, "What's up with your arms?"

He resumes playing with his phone. He looks self-conscious, embarrassed, even. "Ah...just some random minor injuries I got helping my dad at the store. What does everyone want today?"

(Why do I get the feeling Jan's as eager for people to ignore his various wounds as I am for my early morning bedroom wang incident to be totally and completely deleted from this and any other alternate dimensions?)

"Cherry Danish," Eva replies.

"Standard glaze, gluten-free," I say.

I don't remember bringing him, but Mini, having set himself beside my laptop, adds, "Bacon maple bar."

I glare at him. "You don't eat."

"So? I like the smell."

## Friend-Friend

**@theo**

Eva and I start to offer Jan our respective cash, but he pushes back his chair, stands up, motions for us to put our money away. "My treat, everyone."

Wow. It's a shame Ernie's not here. Not only would he be getting free food, he'd also be able to bluntly ask on our behalf, "Now Janny Boy, how in the *world* did someone with your wretched financial background come into doughnut money?" Eva and I watch in a kind of daze as Jan strides purposefully inside 3 Hags', orders, pays, and returns with our doughnuts, which he distributes accordingly. Then he goes back to doing whatever it is he's been doing on his phone all afternoon.

A few bites into her Danish, Eva checks her own phone and mumbles, "Ernie's *really* running late. I have to be back home by quarter to six for dinner with my parents."

I peek at Ernie's SuperMegaFeed. "His feed's dark. Probably playing hooky. He was bugging me and Jan over the weekend with his crazy ideas about finding that stupid cassette tape."

"*Ugh*. Same here."

"I woke up this morning," Jan says, "and he'd left without taking his junk with him. There were honey biscuit boxes *everywhere*."

"Wow. That's not like Ernie at all...wait, on second thought, that's *exactly* like him." Eva nods at me. "Are you going to check on him or what?"

"Me? Why?"

"You're his friend."

"So are you and Jan."

"We're his school pals. You're his *friend*-friend."

"Okay, on the one hand, that *may* be true, but on the other, he's fat and obnoxious—"

Eva folds her arms.

"—and fat!"

She waits.

"Do I *have* to?"

"Go to him, Theo."

## A Murky Revelation

**@theo**

*Bleh.* Fine. Whatever. I'll check on Ernie. I suppose I could upload to the Semantic Web for a while and then lie about it. But my phone would be left behind; at any time Eva or Jan could simply lean over and check to see if I'm really where I'm supposed to be. I could upload back home first, citing network latency concerns, but, then, part of me *does* want to...know. Forget Ernie's missing school, I'm talking about this morning, about how much of me he really saw. I've got to... confirm. Kind of like when you're little, and you're almost but not quite sure if your parents have caught you doing something naughty. You go right to them and pretend nothing's wrong while testing for information, dropping certain key words in certain key ways to get them to reveal whether or not they...*know*.

I swipe myself into the murky twilight that is Ernie's bedroom. The curtains are drawn closed; the usual piles of clutter rise high into the shadows. The air smells like cookie crumbs and dirty socks. Ernie's computer monitor glows beacon-like.

"Ernie?" I whisper, and step carefully toward his desk. The back of his gaming chair is facing me; his arms hang over the rests. He probably passed out during another one of his *Hella War* all-nighters. How on Earth he manages to keep up with his schoolwork I'll never know. "*Psst!* Ernie. It's me, Theo." I move behind and beside him, putting my hand on the headrest. He's wrapped in a grandma quilt. His hair is mussed (he's not wearing his usual beanie). He's got his headset on; there appears to be dried blood caked beneath one of his ears. "Ernie..." I tap his shoulder—

—he jumps in place, looks up at me, screams this startled little girl scream. "*Ahh!!*"

"*Ahh!!*" I scream back.

Ernie takes off his headphones. Waits with his fists clenched on the desktop. His face is swollen, and there are scorch marks around his eyes. It looks like a pair of firecrackers went off, one in each socket. What's that expression about looking none the worse for wear? Well, Ernie looks worse for wear. Way worse.

I tap his shoulder again. "Dude—"

"Go away!"

"—we're waiting for you at 3 Hags'. What's the deal?"

Ernie pulls the quilt around his shoulders. "I'm not hungry. I have a cold—beat it!"

"Is that...baby food?" I glance at the collection of emptied jars on the desktop.

"Maybe!"

"Ernie, what's going on?"

"I told you, I'm sick!"

I lift my hand to adjust my glasses and, forgetting that I don't wear them anymore, I end up simply swiping the bridge of my nose. "But you never miss doughnut day at the Hags'. Not even when you're sick. You gave us all the flu once. Remember your motto? 'Feed a cold—with doughnuts. Drown a fever—with soda—'"

Ernie whirls around in his chair, facing me. "You want to know what's going on? Okay, fine! *This* is what's going on!" He turns on the desk lamp, throws off his quilt, revealing his gigantic, bloated belly. I stare, wide-eyed. He's been overweight for as long as I've known him, but this is enormity even by Ernie Goodale standards. "That's right, junior! I'm pregnant!"

## Guys Don't Get Pregnant

**@theo**

"Ernie, you can't be pregnant," I say. "It's biologically impossible—"

"Last night, at Janny Boy's, I forgot to put my earmuffs on. That evil cassette tape must've been next door. It hexed me, and when I dozed off, the sound waves traveled through Jan's cheap cardboard walls, and—"

I grab Ernie by the shoulders, hold him face-to-face. "Ernie, listen. There's no such thing as an evil cassette tape that gets people pregnant when they play it. It's just an idiotic meme."

Ernie hefts his belly with both hands and thrusts it at me. "Explain *this*, then!"

"I don't know! Maybe it's wheat bloat, or a tumor, or massive internal bleeding, or just plain ol' all-American obesity! But you're definitely not pregnant. You're a guy, and guys *don't get pregnant!*"

"Louis Gossett Jr. *totally* got knocked up by Dennis Quaid in that movie!" Ernie presses his belly against me. "Feel! It just kicked inside me!"

Speaking of movies, I'm grimacing just like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien 3*. "That's indigestion. Your various gasses percolating."

"I see how it is. You don't want to pay up." Ernie pulls away, folds his arms. "I was right about *El Cassetto*, now I'm pregnant, and now you owe me fifty bucks."

I jab my finger angrily at his belly. "If a doctor took an X-ray of your stomach right now the only thing they'd find would be several dozen honey buns floating face-down in a gallon of soda!"

Ernie jabs his finger angrily at my chest. "And if they X-rayed *your* chest they'd find a heart as black as coal!"

"Ernie, you're *not* pregnant."

"Am too!"

"Am not."

"Too!"

"Not."

"*Too!*"

"*Not.*"

Ernie slumps back into his chair, defeated. Doesn't even bother covering back up. "What does it matter? This is the brave new world we live in. I'm pregnant. You're a babe magnet. Darkmaster will take us all."

"I'm not a babe magnet."

"You are."

"*Not.*"
"*Are.*"
Not.

# Crotchfire

**@theo**

Ernie slumps further into his chair. "You're hot stuff and probably adopted and will rule the world by this time next year."

*Sigh.* "Why would I be adopted?"

"Duh."

"Duh what?"

"All those mommies going on daytime TV looking for their babies' daddies—you don't need fancy paternity tests. Want to know who the father is?" Ernie waves his hand at my crotch. "Look at the kickstands."

Where in God's name is this conversation going? "Look at the kickstands?"

"Kickstands tend to run in families. It's basic physiology. Dad's got a wang, his sons tend to have wangs, too. If he's got a giant monster schlong, his sons will have monster schlongs. If he's sporting a bulbous, shiny, *Super Mario Bros.* shaped—"

"I get the idea—"

"Now, there are five types of kickstand, which can be categorized using the 5K classification system: wiener, wang, dong, and schlong."

Dear God, he's got a notepad out now, and is sketching out the details.

"Wieners are your entry-level kickstands, shy and unobtrusive—like something you'd see in a Michelangelo painting. Easily missed, quickly forgotten. Wangs are also on the small side, but not altogether insignificant, and oftentimes earn themselves honorable mention in a variety of subcategories. Dongs are your straightforward, well-built kickstands, neither extremely big nor extremely small. Something respectable you'd find on your average Joe. Schlongs would be your porn star fare. Big and beautiful."

"I thought you said there are *five* kickstand types."

Ernie nods. "I did."

"But you only listed four."

"Those are the official ones. The fifth is...unofficial, and reserved for those rare individuals to whom the normal rules don't apply."

"What's the fifth type?" I ask, swallowing hard.

"*Schrittfeuer*. Crotchfire. The unknowable, the undefinable, the incomprehensible—the elicitor of all fear and loathing in Las Vegas. An unholy aberration or the next step in human evolution, but provocative nonetheless. You, my friend, have crotchfire. Now, I ask you, have you ever seen your pops in the shower? Does the viewing of his special area cause hysterical blindness and severe

hemorrhaging of the eyes, nose, ears, and mouth? Because if not, you may want to entertain the possibility that you were switched at birth with the spawn of some random *schrittfeuer* ascendant from beyond—or your mom was messing around behind your daddy's back."

"Lots of guys have, uh, their own unique kickstands, I'm sure—"

"Yeah, but you happen to be the proud owner and operator of *this* particular kickstand."

"—and I hardly think I've got *schrittfeuer*."

"Oh, you've got crotchfire all right." Ernie hands me his sketch. Dabs at a flake of dried blood dangling from one of his scorched eyelids.

I study the sketch. It's little more than a proud-standing stick figure with light shooting out of its crotch all David Lo Pan style. "Dude, what is it with you and wangs?"

"Wangs are fun. Wangs are entertaining. *Everyone* likes looking at wangs. I'm simply comfortable enough with my masculinity to admit it."

"So, you admit you like looking at wangs."

"The *point* is, there were once privileges being exchanged between your mom and some dude who may or may not have been your currently-Asian daddy."

"Screw you, Stay Puft," I say. "My mom did *not*—my dad would never—my parents made me!"

"Your parents are Asian and Russian, neither of which are known for having transcendent genitalia—"

"No more talking about genitalia."

Ernie looks almost disappointed. "Your *schrittfeuer* needs to be talked about, Theo. It needs to be studied, showcased, performed upon the world via a traveling circus—"

I crumble the sketch in my hand, never once breaking eye contact with Ernie. "No. More. *Schrittfeuer*."

He blinks back at me. "Fine. Whatever."

I drop the sketch into the wastebasket.

Stare fixedly at my feet. "Don't tell anyone," I say softly.

"About what?" Ernie asks.

"About...what you saw this morning. About my, uh, 5K rating."

"Why the hell wouldn't I?"

"Because it's my own personal business, and I don't need anyone to know about it. It's bad enough the way everyone was looking at me when I was at Eva's birthday party."

"I would *kill* for the kind of publicity you got at Eva's party!"

"Well, I wouldn't."

"What the funk's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with me. I just want to be blissfully anonymous. Is that too much to ask?"

"Yeah!"

Still staring at my feet, it occurs to me that I can upload out of here anytime I

want. Nonetheless, I stay. "I...don't like the attention. I'm not, uh, comfortable with what it represents."

"Oh, *Gawd*," Ernie moans. "Are we having a pipe and tweed jacket moment? Feel free to drag the couch in from the living room and tell me all your problems, why don't you?"

I glance toward the bedroom door, considering—

"Wow, bruh. Your computer *kung fu* may be strong, but your understanding of sarcasm leaves a butt-load to be desired."

Right. "Can you please put your grandma quilt back on?"

"No deal. Now, what, pray tell, does pretty girls paying attention to your fabulous bod *represent*?"

"You *know*," I reply, looking at my feet again.

"I'm not a mind reader."

"Growing up. Girls. Dating. Relationships. All that used to be interesting in a 'some day I want to do it' kind of way. But suddenly with Mini on the scene, it's all I can think about."

Ernie looks incredulous. "*That's* what's bothering you? Being horny?"

Shrug. Swallow. Nod.

"Christ on a cracker! So you're getting all hot and bothered and have to rub one out five or six times a day just to maintain a semblance of sanity. Welcome to puberty, junior."

"I don't *want* to rub one out all the time! I don't *want* to be all drooling and shaggy and barely managing a C average like all the older boys at school because I'm too distracted chasing after *girls!* I want...control. Simplicity. Serenity. Things are changing so quickly all of the sudden. I'm not sure I'm ready."

"What, for an amazing career as a high school studmuffin?"

"Not *that*, specifically. But everything else."

Ernie scratches his chin. "Far be it from me to burst your bubble, but you *do* realize how weird that is, right? I mean, did your Kindergarten teacher try to give you extra credit in the boys' room or something?"

"Ew, no!"

"Well, you could've fooled me."

# My Life as a Tweenage Nudist

**@theo**

Yeah, yeah. I'm a freak and a weirdo and I've got a million wires crossed inside my head. I'd touched on all of this when I'd confided in Mini this morning. There's one thing I left out, though. "I have this...recurring nightmare about being naked at school."

"That old chestnut?" Ernie scoffs. "*Everyone* has the naked-at-school dream."

"Really?"

"As sure as the Pope plays Hacky Sack when he thinks nobody's looking."

"Mine's so...*detailed*, though."

"What, like Morgan Freeman's narrating it or something?"

I take a deep breath. "No. I have this dream where I'm getting up for school one morning, and I realize that I've suddenly got this...crotchfire thing going on—"

"Oh, so it's a documentary."

"Shut up and let me finish."

"Just saying."

"So, I'm suddenly all laser beams downstairs while simultaneously my mom's had some kind of parenting breakdown. She's convinced that her hands-off attitude is the reason I'm so uptight all the time, is why I can never sleep, and has led to me losing my eyesight through an overuse of technology and all that. She's decided to 'be a better mother' by paying more attention to me, and by making our home as natural and minimalistic as possible. No more tech, no lousy food (no biggie—we do that already), and...nudism. Her logic is that relieving the entire household of technology, toxins, inhibitions, and social stresses will help bring us back into balance as individuals and as a family. She tells me all this while standing at the foot of my bed, completely oblivious to the fact that she's naked as a jaybird —"

"Wait, wait," Ernie interrupts. "I'm having trouble with your imagery. Can you describe in detail your mom's—"

"*In the dream,*" I continue, glaring at him, "my closet and dresser have been cleared out. My clothes are gone, and my mom's just standing there all undressed and telling me it's time to rise and shine like nothing out of the ordinary's going on. She holds out a folded bath towel, a pair of flip-flops, a baseball cap, a bracelet, and a necklace with some dog tags. She tells me, 'These are your new clothes and ID, darling!' And I'm cowering with the blanket pulled up to my chin. I'm like, 'Why do I have to be naked? I'm perfectly happy wearing clothes!' And Mom just

ignores me, hands me my new *clothes*, kisses me on the forehead. 'Oh, honey, don't you worry! You're going to make a *wonderful* nudist!'"

Ernie butts in again: "Um, people with self-censoring body parts should *not* take their clothes off. Just look at what happened when Meg flashed that bully Mike in *Family Guy*."

Glare. Frownie-face. "The dream changes. Suddenly I'm undressed and standing in the kitchen doorway with my hands cupped over my junk. My parents are already eating breakfast, and are acting as if it's the kind of thing they do every morning. My mom tells me to stop being such a big baby, come and eat, my food's getting cold. So, I hurry into a chair at the table, where at least everyone's lower halves are hidden under the tabletop. I can deal with this, right? I'll just make sure I eat the slowest, wait for my parents to finish and leave the room before getting up again. I'm working this out in my head when my dad asks me to take the turkey out of the oven."

"What the furk?" Ernie asks. "Why would you be eating roast turkey at seven in the morning on a school day? Why would you be eating turkey at all? I thought you were a carrot-kisser!"

"It's a dream, doofus. I never said it was going to make sense."

"Okay. Sexy naked vegetarian family having a roasted turkey for breakfast Monday morning. Go on."

"By now my parents have caught onto my scheme," I continue. "They're totally finished with their breakfast, and are just sitting there now looking for an excuse to get me out of my seat. They almost seem amused at my embarrassment, and keep whispering to each other while pointing subtly at me. My dad reminds me about the turkey, but I'm fudging, saying I'll do it in a sec when really I'm trying to figure out how to take out the turkey while keeping one hand over my crotch and/or butt at all times. In the end I get up quickly, swiveling myself around so that by the time my junk is in view, it's facing away from the table. I walk to the oven, trying to act nonchalant as I take out the turkey, set it on the stovetop. But that's not good enough. 'Bring it to the table, buddy,' Dad says. Which is, of course, impossible to do without facing him and Mom full-on. I consider sidling over, using a towel to carry the pan so that the excess cloth hangs in front of me—and I'm like, this is ridiculous. My parents don't care what I look like below the beltline. I'm probably making a huge deal out of nothing, even though that's kind of what they're doing. But whatever. I take a deep breath and turn around, walk back to the table with the turkey, sit down—and there's total and complete silence. My dad's shell-shocked, and is bleeding from one nostril. Mom's dazed-looking, with two smoldering holes where her eyes used to be. 'It's okay, sweetie,' she says, trying not to sound surprised. 'People come in all shapes and sizes. It's nothing to worry about.' But it is. I'm different. I know it. My parents know it. And now the whole world is going to know it, too."

Ernie coos, "*So* melodramatic."

"Can I finish?"

"Whatever."

*Ugh.* I shouldn't even bother—and yet I've gone this far, haven't I? I certainly can't make things worse by finishing. "Fast-forward to Boca Linda. It was bad enough having a bare-bottomed breakfast with my parents. I do *not* want to show off in front of the whole school, but there I am, getting out of my mom's car, naked, backpacked, sweat beading on my forehead. Despite Nakers and Newdcoin being a thing, it's total pandemonium all the way up the main walk. Students and staff scream and jump and lurch aside, making way, dodging the path of my crotchfire, eyeballs exploding, hair igniting, blood oozing. I can hear the blood rushing in my ears. I can feel the breeze against my butt. I can hear people whispering to each other: 'Is that some kind of hippie cosplay?' 'I heard his parents lost their jobs, and they had to sell everything—even their clothes—just to keep the bank from foreclosing on their house.' 'I heard they have him mining Newdcoin illegally to help pay for rice.' 'It's like looking at the sun.' '...Rosebud.'"

"Got it," Ernie says. "Your crotch has mesmerized an entire city block. What happens next?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Where'd you get the popcorn?"

He looks down at the bag of Act II in his lap, as if it's always been there. "Leftovers."

At least he's getting some fiber. "Anyway, the scene skips forward again, and it's first period. I'm standing at the head of the classroom. Everyone's smoldering in their seats. Mr. Barchetta's next to me. He's got on welder's goggles. He says, 'Now, now, settle down, class. Cameras away, please.' Then he grabs me by the wrist, lifts my arm into the air. 'Does everyone see this?' he asks. The students nod, though I doubt any of them can see at all anymore. 'This is a nudist license. It certifies that Mr. Ivanovich here may practice non-sexual public nudity as part of his anti-stress regime, as directed by his doctor and subject to the rules and guidelines of his family's nudist club.'

"And I'm like oh, my *God*, not only does everyone know I've got crotchfire, they also know I'm seeing a shrink. How can Mr. Barchetta be so totally oblivious? 'Boca Linda is supportive of all races, genders, creeds, political affiliations, and lifestyle choices,' he says. 'Everyone is treated equally. Theo is no different than any of you.'

"'Um, yeah he is,' sasses this one girl before leaning over to vomit.

"'Well, even so, there's to be no cat-calling, no ogling, taunting, or whispering under your breath. Theo is making a huge adjustment in his life, so we all need to show tolerance and support. Anyone caught harassing him will be sent to the principal's office. Is that understood? Now...' He hands me a piece of chalk. '... solve for *x*.' I take the chalk and face the blackboard, and holy crap, it's, like, a foot tall and mounted at the base of the wall! I have to bend over on all fours to write on it. I'd been dreading doing jumping jacks during warm-up for gym class, but *this*... this is like when you have to give a speech in front of a room full of people, and your friends tell you to imagine everyone else naked, except *you're* the one without underwear. *You're* the one wearing your house key around your neck. I can't take anymore—I do the only thing I can think of: I run away, out of Mr. Barchetta's

classroom, down the hall and into Thrill-Kill's office. For once I'm glad she's a chain smoker, because now I've got a literal smoke screen obscuring my lower half.

"'Well, well,' Thrill-Kill says, and gives me the look-over, not at all surprised or affected by my appearance. 'Shall we sit and chat a while about everything that's wrong with this scenario?'

"I throw myself into one of her chairs. Dressed, undressed, spewing a toxic searchlight from my groin, I don't even care anymore. I've been robbed of every last ounce of dignity. I want to curl up and die.

"'Enjoy the stardom while it lasts,' Thrill-Kill chuckles as she takes out an enormous DSLR camera. 'I've seen scores of crotches in my time, and while yours may be the proverbial cock of the walk now, the novelty will soon wear off, thereby rendering you perfectly unspectacular. And the masses will forget. Now, hold still while I take your yearbook photo...'" I trail off, letting out a deep breath. "That's pretty much it. She aims the camera at my junk, the flash goes off, and I wake up in a cold sweat."

## Regarding the Suckage of Adulthood

**@theo**

Ernie blinks at me, his hand frozen halfway between his mouth and his popcorn bag. "Wow. That is some seriously messed up twaddle, Dr. Manhattan."

"Could we stop with the nicknames?"

"Just one more?"

"No."

"*Please?"*

I sigh. "Fine."

"Dong With the Wind."

"Happy?"

Ernie smiles, proud of himself. "My fancy's been tickled. But seriously, what does it matter? Thanks to the Boho Mandate, we're *all* three-quarters naked these days."

"Except where it counts," I say.

"Still, your dream's not so bad. Change a few things, and it's pretty rad, actually."

"How could it possibly be rad?"

"Ditch Mr. Barchetta. Make the teacher female and stacked, and deflower her at the end while the whole class watches and cheers you on."

"You're a fount of wisdom."

"Well, what do *you* think the dream means, then, brainiac?"

I think hard for a moment. "That I don't like being naked in front of people."

"No, no—I'm talking subconscious. Inner workings and all that crud."

I think harder. "I guess, then, I just don't like...attention. People looking at me, judging me. Why do you think I do Web design work sitting behind a computer screen all day?"

"I always assumed you had a doomscrolling addiction."

"It's so I don't have to go anywhere or do anything. I can just work and get paid from home, then spend the rest of my time doing the things I *want* to do."

"Introverts, unite."

"I'm not an introvert."

"Yeah? You sure sound like one."

"I don't know what you'd call it. Growing up scares me. Girls, school dances, first, second, and third base. Learning to drive, shaving, registering for the military draft, paying taxes...it all kind of terrifies me, Ernie."

He nods. “Ever wonder why kids are so wrecked in their teens? It’s because they know they’re going to spend their entire lives working for the Man. So, they drink, bang, and kill as much as possible before finally surrendering to the suckage of adulthood.”

I bite my lip. “What if I’m not good at any of it?”

“Judging by the crummy adults I’ve met in my lifetime, I don’t think anyone’s good at any of it.”

That’s oddly comforting. “I just want to be graduated already. Go from right now to my diploma without any of the awkwardness in between.”

“That would require a cheat code.” Ernie sets a buttery hand on my arm. “You’re not a cheater, are you?”

I glance down at his scorched eyes, his bloody nose and ears. Vaguely I recall Mom suffering similar injuries after accidentally walking in on me summoning my spunk in our bathroom (Vangelis’ *Mythodea* was involved, it was a whole thing—don’t ask), and I wonder, will it always be this way whenever anyone sees my junk? “You know, I think I get it now. I get why you’re so uptight about *El Cassetto*. It’s one last fling, one last flight of fancy before you have to get down to puberty along with the rest of us.”

Ernie blinks. “Is that your professional opinion?”

“Yeah.”

“*El Cassetto’s* real, Theo.”

Wow, he called me by my actual name.

“It’s real, it’s out there, and it’s coming for us.” He lets me go, swivels around in his chair, facing his computer.

I reach past him, grab the mouse, and double-click myself back to 3 Hags’.

Eva and Jan look up at me expectantly.

Taking my seat, I say, “Ernie thinks he’s pregnant.”

Stunned silence.

Mini calmly folds his mitts and asks, “Would it be impolite for me to puke in that flower pot over there?”

# Denial

**@theo**

I don't have *schrittfeuer*.
Really.

## sodacanhero

**@ernie**

So...Theo's whole nudist dream thing, that was hella weird, right? Like, I'm not the only one who thinks he's an A-minus pop quiz away from renouncing clothing, rejecting modern society, and running through Times Square in some kind of foaming rampage, am I? And what's the deal with him ignoring the dickies out of my pregnancy? How much more proof does he need that *El Cassetto* is real and knocking mofos up? A double-blindfold test? Publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journal? Is Rothgar a good name for my baby if it's a boy? Leilani if it's a girl?

I need to vent like a mofo. Bundling myself up in my quilt (screw you, Boho Mandate, I'm chilly!), I type out a couple of SuperMegaUpdates on my computer:

**evil_ernie:** my best friend l33t_master has a killer crotch
**evil_ernie:** theres a cassette tape knocking peeps up and my friends think im full of crap
**evil_ernie:** and Im not going to win fifty bucks
**evil_ernie:** eff el cassetto and all the pain it's caused me
**evil_ernie:** cry for evil_ernie

I lean back in my chair and sulk, letting my computer monitor burn a rectangular square of light into my retinas. I send Darkmaster the usual barrage of chat messages, but he doesn't respond. This goes on for several minutes. Then I get a DM:

**sodacanhero:** I believe you.
**sodacanhero:** Download to my place so that we can talk in private. No bacon.

I know what you're thinking. Someone under the dubious screen name "sodacanhero" wants me to download to their place so we can talk in *private*. Spare me the Dangers of Trusting Online Strangers speech. I'm perfectly aware that what lies at the other end of the chat is likely a middle-aged boner aimed squarely at my profile icon. But beggars can't be choosers. If there's a chance this guy can offer any insight into my predicament, I'm going to check it out. No credit card numbers or bank pins—I'm not *trusting* anyone. I'm being cautiously optimistic. I'll bring protection.

**evil_ernie:** when?
**sodacanhero:** No time like the present.
**sodacanhero:** Meet me at the soda machine.
**sodacanhero:** Come alone.

Okay, I'm *definitely* bringing protection, the obvious choice being a handgun or, at the very least, a rusted-nail two-by-four. Looking around my bedroom, though, there's not a whole lot that I can weaponize at a moment's notice. How come I never played baseball as a kid? A motherflipping steel bat would be perfect right about now. Maybe one of Janny Boy's barbells—or a *katana* blade from Theo's mom's yoga studio, because you *know* she gets up to some kinky naked martial arts in there between clients.

In the end, convenience wins out. My grandparents are whittling away dinnertime power hour in the living room, Gramps with his feet up on the recliner, Grams' cardboard cutout resting next to him. The two of them look like department store mannequins illuminated by the unnatural LED glow of the TV. It's no sweat slipping wordless beside Gramps, casually snatching his cane, and hurrying back to my room. A moment later—quilt off, towel on—I'm downloading into what looks like an Internet cafe after hours. I brandish the hell out of Gramps' cane, squint into the semi-darkness, begin walking toward the soda machine at the far end of the room.

## Puke Green

**@ernie**

Rows of screen-saving computer monitors pass on either side of me. sodacanhero stands beside the soda machine, the front of which is slightly opened. Enough light's pouring out from inside that I can see he's this Dale Gribble-looking white dude wearing a tinfoil hat and way too much checkerboard flannel.

"sodacanhero?" I ask, stopping in front of the machine.

Me, with my walking stick.

He, with a can of Sprite.

"Yeah," sodacanhero says, "but you can call me Sprite. Why are you wearing a towel?"

I bump his proffered fist. "It's a SoCal thing. Are you a repairman or something?"

He swings open the soda machine door, sets one foot inside. "Not exactly."

"I follow him inside the soda machine" is honestly about as WTF a thing as anybody could ever say or do. Even more WTF, though, is what's *inside* the soda machine: a cramped, but impeccably-organized miniature apartment. It's literally the world's tiniest tiny home—and it's made out of a *soda machine*. Either Sprite's tunneled into a closet in the adjacent suite, or there's some kind of TARDIS action going on, because we're basically dealing with a desk-bed combo situation, office and mini-fridge below, bunk above. I'm one part impressed, two parts confused.

"This is some place you've got here," I say.

Sprite beams proudly. "I got the idea from that Sergio Santos guy who converted a closet into an apartment. I figured if he could do *that* with a closet, I could do *this* with a soda machine. Hybrid SuperMegaNet server. Augmented reality. The soda machine façade is actual. The rest is virtual."

Huh. Kind of like Jan's persistent skin. But I thought only Beta knew how to bend those rules. "So, you're some kind of hacker?"

"More of a copy-and-paster, but I make do. As long as there's a Wi-Fi signal, that is."

I glance at the front of the soda machine. "What happens when someone tries to buy a soda?"

Sprite pops open the mini-fridge (stocked top to bottom with a variety of colas), holds up a small mug filled with coins and dollar bills. "That's what these are for. Someone puts money in the slot, I push a soda through the dispenser. Of course, it gets kind of tricky when I need to make change."

"Or take a credit card."

"That's what the 'Sorry, cash only' sticky note is for."

"Okay, so what does your living in a luxurious soda machine tiny home have to do with me or my problem?"

"I know what it's like to be the crazy guy," Sprite explains, offering me an ottoman and sitting across from me. "The screwball no one believes, the guy who's nuts just because he decided to break free of ever-increasing rent prices and move into a half-real, half-virtual soda machine tiny home embedded in the rear wall of his former place of employ."

"Good for you. But I'm not nuts, I'm pregnant."

Sprite glances at my belly. "You weren't kidding about that?"

"Heck no."

"Wow. I kind of feel like I should be tweeting this with a #wtf hashtag or something."

"Ditto, bruh. Now, what's the deal?"

Sprite leans in close and opens his mouth wide.

I scrutinize his teeth shrewdly.

"I found out," he says, "that the government's got surveillance equipment hooked to my teeth."

"Really? I don't see anything."

Sprite straightens. "Of course you don't! They're real small." He starts making grand gestures in the air, his tinfoil hat sliding around on his head. "Microscopic cameras and microphones. Everyone's got them, but I'm one of the few who actually *knows*. Fluoride in the water—that's the catalyst. Nanoparticles bond with your enamel. You don't even know they're there."

"Is that why you wear the tinfoil hat?"

"No. I wear the tinfoil hat to keep the Grays from reading my thoughts." Sprite adjusts his hat, looks intense. "I used to work here at Puke Green Cyber Cafe—"

*That's* what this place is called?

"—I was the admin and chat room moderator, till they bugged me. See, I know the servers too well. I know where to go when I want information, and if there's one thing the government hates, it's the free flow of information. You've heard of SuperMegaNet's persistent skinning feature, right?"

"Yeah. It's been in beta forever."

"To the general public, sure. But the finished code is there, always has been, and it's ready to go. Taurus Labs is just sitting on it until they can get the monetization part in their favor. Kind of like how we already have cures for cancer and AIDS, it's just the powers that be who're keeping a lid on things until such time as great quantities of money can be harvested by the evil pharmaceutical companies.

"This tape you're looking for, this *El Cassetto*, it's some killer nodge, brah. It was designed by government officials at the highest level. It's a form of population control. They screwed over the Mexicans by encouraging a culture of large families dependent on low income. They created an artificial reliance on federal assistance. The Mexicans were the pilot program. Now it's being rolled out on a larger scale.

SuperMegaNet is being used to lock in the lower-class. The government wants to create a nation of poverty, families too large and too much in debt to do anything but go to and from their menial jobs in the factories and fields supporting the upper-class. It's all about monthly subscriptions, enforcement, control, tracking—which reminds me..." Sprite holds up a bottle of whiskey and a pair of pliers. "... have a swig of this, and I'll take care of those surveillance molars for you."

## Hard Shaft, with Milton Shaftburger

**@mini**

Would you look at that: Theo's conked right out on a Monday night. Meanwhile, I'm wide awake because I'm a plush representation of his muff existing in a state of perceptive flux. *Id est*, I don't sleep, but watch late-night TV instead.

All the major networks are running back-to-back reruns of *Two and a Half Men*. KANG, a local affiliate, is doing a roundtable interview with people of varying importance and clout. More precisely, "The *El Cassetto* Debate" on a show called *Hard Shaft, with Milton Shaftburger*. Curious, I grab Theo's phone and look up Milton's IMDB page, and am admittedly surprised to discover that he's *not* a satirist, but rather a leftover talk show relic from the 1960s whose career has somehow managed to span seven decades:

- *It's Milton Shaftburger!* (1960s variety show)
- *The Shaft* (1970s celebrity interviews)
- *Hard Shaft* (1980s investigative *60 Minutes* rip—ongoing)
- *Soft Shaft* (1990s comedy sitcom lasting thirteen episodes)
- *With Shaft We Thrust* (2000s podcast)

Additionally, he's got his own cryptocurrency: Shaftcoin.

Milton himself is this geeky-looking gray-haired old guy with giant schoolteacher glasses and a permanent deadpan. He seems to like naming his TV shows using double entendres, but he's so old-school, I doubt all of them are intentional. He probably thinks he's being clever, and even a bit witty, but instead it's just...awkward. Like any mom besides Theo's trying to dance to EDM, or your grandparents talking openly about "the sex."

I kind of have to watch.

"*Where were you the night Asia Afrodesia got pregnant?*" Milton asks the camera. "*That's the question future generations will ask when the subject of tonight's program comes up at the dinner table, beside the water cooler, in the boys' locker room, while standing in line for digital enemas at the pharmacy. My guests are Shakaist Edna Forthright and journalist Thornton Milburrough, both of whom will be providing a little perspective on the spontaneous pregnancy trend currently sweeping the nation. Hard facts, open rapport, real issues. I'm Milton Shaftburger, let's get hard.*"

Oh, *wow*. This is a thing.

The camera cuts to a wider shot, revealing a vintage shag-pad of a table behind which Milton and his guests are seated. "*What are we talking about here?*"

"*Technology running rampant,*" Thornton replies. "*An extremely high-profile celebrity harlot who's made a career out of being naked, promiscuous, and forever nineteen has suddenly been called out by the very same social media platform that made her a star in the first place. Whether we like it or not, the* El Cassetto *epidemic—and it is an epidemic—has put the topic of technological contagion on the table. We share everything online. It's the real-world equivalent of having unprotected sex. Everyone melding their data with everyone else on a daily basis—of course it was going to lead to unwanted consequences sooner or later. The social media singularity is here, the tech is able, but is the flesh willing?*"

Milton turns to Edna. "*I understand you have a different viewpoint.*"

Edna arranges her strophium, adjusts her loincloth, takes an unnecessarily long swig from her organic, gluten-free water box. "*Yes, I certainly do—*"

"*Give it to me hard.*"

"*—in the West, pregnancy is a subject that's become very nearly taboo. Historically, a pregnancy was a joyous occasion, the promise of new life forthcoming into a burgeoning young world. But in modern times, pregnancy is a mistake, a hindrance, a shameful accident that suggests the end of one's career, family dishonor, teenage stereotypes being fulfilled. No wonder even the mere mention of a pregnancy brings to mind shattered dreams, lost innocence. A girl has no longer become a woman, but rather a slut. Tainted. Broken. Damaged goods. The problem we're facing isn't technological, it's sociological. Just as knives don't kill of their own volition, nor does tech impregnate of its own accord. People are making poor sexual choices, and they're blaming the consequences on tech in the form of an Internet meme.*"

Thornton clears his throat. "*I respectfully disagree, Ms. Forthright. This has everything to do with technology. Social media, high-speed Internet, cryptocurrency—Newdcoin. Promiscuity begets promiscuity, and tech is the Great Enabler. An entire culture has been created around online sexuality. It's only a matter of time before the other foot drops. I did a column for* The Angelican *in which I wrote, and I quote, 'That the world economy of tomorrow will be built upon the bare butts and crotches of young people mining Newdcoin in their bedrooms is a bastardization of blockchain technology that will either bring the cryptocurrency movement to its knees—or usher in a new era of social delinquency the likes of which we've never seen.' Think about that, Milton.*" He leans forward, taps the tabletop with his index finger. "*Think about it.*" He leans back again.

"*Dire words,*" Milton says. "*What can we do about it?*"

Thornton starts to say something, but Edna cuts him off: "*Open dialogues, everywhere and all the time. No doors in the household. The embrasure of a wholesome family Shakaist lifestyle. Roll out San Angelico's Boho Mandate nationwide and make it permanent. No more cell phones outside of work. Face-to-face conversations instead of text messaging. Make love in front your children, answer their questions without trepidation. Stop using antibacterial soap. Drink boxed water instead of bottled water. Go gluten-free and vegetarian. Add the square root of pi to*

*the LGBTQIA+ rainbow—"*

I turn off the TV and sit quietly in the darkness, and I'm thinking to myself that a lesser puppet would have been disturbed by what he just saw. But try as the media might to confuse the masses, I know better. *El Cassetto* isn't bad tech versus bad family values, it's a classic case of mass hysteria. Copycat pregnancies. Hypochondria. Urban mythology gone wild. Other rock stars perform scantily-clad? Asia performs naked but for her ankle monitor. Other rock stars have backup singers? Asia has backup *bangers*—guys with giant muscles and enormous wangs who bang gals with perky bottoms and dauntless racks. You want to know how Asia got pregnant? Just go to one of her live shows. There's enough semen flying around onstage to knock up a small country. She's only come forward now to capitalize on a trend.

The media's split America into two distinct factions regarding *El Cassetto*. One believes that there's actually an evil cassette tape going around knocking people up. The other believes it's a spate of unchecked virility brought about by a lack of proper sex-ed and communication between parents and their kids regarding the ways of the world. I bet a lot of parents are at this very moment having The Talk with their sons and daughters. Needlessly. Well, I guess it's never exactly *needless* to be having The Talk with your kids. It's just that parents are doing it because they're worried about a racist Internet meme downloading into their daughters' bedrooms instead of doing it because they want their kids to make educated decisions when it comes to knocking boots. Meanwhile, no one's asking what's on the *other* side of the smokescreen—

A knock at the bedroom door wakes Theo with a start.

"Come in!" he calls out groggily, and feels around the bedside table for his special contacts.

The door swings open.

Theo's parents are standing in the hallway.

His mom says, "Theo, dear? We just finished watching the news, and we've decided it's time to have...the Talk."

See what I mean?

# The Talk

**@theo**

This is how my boho-compliant family holds all of its serious or important conversations: we go towels-only and meet up in Mom's studio downstairs. Mom lights some incense, plays a meditative tune on her Japanese *shamisen*; me and Dad do breathing exercises while maintaining lotus positions on our respective mats. It may seem a little (okay, a *lot*) weird to you, but when your mom's a yogi homeopath/licensed aromatherapist who's heavily into the New Age movement, you learn to become desensitized to the spiritual extravagance.

Eventually, Mom sets the *shamisen* down, opens her eyes. Smiles comfortingly at me. "Your father and I have been keeping up with the news. There's a lot of talk about something called *El Cassetto*. Have you heard of that?"

"Um...yeah," I reply uncertainly. "I guess."

"And do you know what it means to 'listen to *El Cassetto*?'"

I shrug.

"See, when two people love each other very much and want to express that love physically..."

Oh, no. She doesn't mean—

"...they may hug and kiss, maybe take their clothes off to 'Netflix and chill' or 'listen to *El Cassetto*.'"

Great. Just great. Not only have my parents heard of *El Cassetto*, they think it's my generation's choice euphemism for sex.

Mom continues, unabashed: "Now, sweetie, you're no longer a little boy, but a young man entering puberty. With all that's going on in the news about *El Cassetto*, we want to make sure you have the information you need to make educated, responsible decisions about when, where, how, and with whom you might be listening to *El Cassetto*."

You know, I'd say it couldn't get any worse, except I've been here before. It *can* get worse. It *already* got worse that time Mom caught me in the upstairs bathroom on the night my spunk arrived. I'd rather not talk about sex at all with my parents. But between inadvertently flashing Mom and simply having to listen to her talk about boners, I'd vastly prefer the latter. I can at least deal with that.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, honey," Mom says. "Sex is a normal, healthy, perfectly natural part of life that should be discussed openly and honestly. No shame, no questions too dumb or stupid. No gutter words. Instead, penis. Vagina. Anus. Erection. Clitoris. Orgasm. Ejaculation. Nocturnal emission—"

"Stop," Dad interrupts, and holds up his hand, waves an annoying tendril of incense from his face.

Mom blinks. "Dear?"

"This isn't working."

"I've got more incense sticks in the kitchen—"

"No, no. It's not the incense. It's...it's all of *this*." Dad gestures at his yoga mat, our towels, Mom's *shamisen*.

"What about it?"

"Don't you think it's a tad excessive?"

"But the diagrams, the prophylactics and demo doll." Mom points at the far end of the room, where there's a giant shopping bag with a dildo and what looks like a mannequin leg hanging out of the top. "I have a whole thing planned out."

"And I'm sure it's educational and enlightening and all that. But I think we're throwing too many ingredients into a recipe that doesn't need them." Dad takes Mom's hand, gives her a reassuring look. "This is a father-son moment. I'll take care of it."

Mom looks disappointed, but gets to her feet, leaves the studio, dragging her *shamisen* behind her.

# Hang Dong

**@theo**

Once we're alone, Dad breaks his lotus and lets out the longest sigh any human being has ever exhaled—to the extent that he actually seems to deflate slightly. He nods at me, smiles. "I've got a secret."

"You do?" I ask.

"Mm-hm."

I wait.

"Going into this," he continues, "I was going to play the backup support card and let your mom do all the talking. But the sex doll, the condoms and dildos and pie charts—I think you and I can make more miles if we just keep it simple. Sound good?"

Anything's better than Mom demoing dildos and sex dolls! "Yeah," I agree.

Dad laughs. "Anya's New Age stuff, it's either really, really good, or it's really, really bad. There's no in-between, is there?"

I chuckle nervously.

"Okay. The Talk." Dad stares straight ahead. He thinks for a moment. "You know how the equipment works. Whatever you don't know you'll learn through *consensual* trial and error. That's not what this is about. What it's about is...well, let me put it this way. When I was a little younger than you, my grandpa caught me looking at a dirty magazine. His version of The Talk was to sit me down, hand me a pack of condoms, and bestow upon me these words of wisdom: 'The day you get a girl pregnant is the day you become a man. It's also the day you move out of my house.'" Dad puts his arm around my shoulder. "I'm passing his words down to you, Theo."

"Uh...thanks," I murmur. Surprisingly, I'm a little disappointed there wasn't more to it.

"No problem. Any questions?"

Now it's my turn to think for a moment. "Why do they call it the birds and the bees?"

Dad grins. "Because they're too chicken to say 'dicks and pussies.' Don't tell your mom I used the non-scientific terms."

I laugh, and most of the awkwardness I'd felt coming in now drains out of me. I'm kind of glad we had this weird yoga sex talk thing. I start to get up, uncrossing my legs—and the heel of my foot somehow hooks into my towel, pinning it to the mat as the rest of me, now naked as a jaybird, goes upright. And for a brief,

horrifying moment, I'm totally exposed in front of Dad. There goes a brilliant flash of golden light, an angelic choral chant, a robust whiff of the Santanas—

"Oops," I mutter, playing it cool, stooping quickly and grabbing my towel, fastening it around my waist again.

The light vanishes.

The choir is silenced.

The breeze subsides.

But the damage is done. I've just crotchfired my dad. He saw me, saw *it*, saw everything. There's blood trickling from his now sightless eyes, his soundless ears; rivulets of snot escape his nostrils; his hair is mussed, his skin clammy. He's totally shell-shocked.

The flight part of my fight or flight instinct kicks in— "*Umgoodnightdad*," I mumble quickly, and rush for the door.

While Dad's rasped, Bowman-esque response haunts me on the way out: "My God, it's full of stars..."

# Afterhour

**@theo**

"Why does this keep happening to me?" I ask as, back in my room, I lie in bed and stare into the darkness.

Mini crawls out from under my towel and sprawls himself on my stomach. "At this point it would probably be easier keeping track of people you *haven't* flashed."

"*Har-har.*"

"It's like there's a conspiracy: the world needs more cowbell, whenever, wherever, and however possible—only instead of cowbell it's your crotch."

I swallow. "There can't *really* be a conspiracy." Can there?

"Ever see *The Truman Show*?"

"I am *not* Truman Burbank."

"Your crotch might be."

"Okay, Ernie."

"No, really. Think about it. Modern-day TV is all about pushing limits, right? In the 1940s it was women baring ankle. In the 1970s it was drug use on *Sesame Street*. These days, the networks and streaming services have gone just about as far as they can with the violence, cussing, bare butts and boobs. Full-frontal nudity may be the next frontier, but a TV show starring live-action genitalia specifically? That's the *final* frontier."

"You sure like to think about crotches a lot," I say.

"I'm your spunk. I'm supposed to think about crotches. And crack."

"Ah."

"Seriously, though. When was the last time you checked for hidden cameras?" Mini starts to lift my towel—

I slap him away. "What *am* I going to do?"

"Is that a crotch-specific question, or a rhetorical?"

"Both."

Mini sits up, nods gravely at me. "Call the universe's bluff and go right to Jeff Bezos mode with some wang shots. Lay it all out there, make it a done deal, get it over with. Here, take out your phone..."

Which of course I do *not*. Instead, I continue to stare unblinking into the shadows. Sleep tonight will be nonexistent. I keep thinking of Dad slowly bleeding to death on his yoga mat with an afterimage of my junk burned into his retinas. I think of what Ernie said about father-and-son kickstands, and wonder if Dad's crotch is similarly afflicted—in which case I can stop worrying that *he'll* be worried

I'm inexplicably afflicted while he's perfectly normal. Instead, we can focus on why exposure to my crotch seems to have the same effect on people as the Ark of the Covenant had on the Germans at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I think of Thrill-Kill's insight in my nudist dream, about how I'm preoccupied with my own novelty, and how eventually it'll wear off.

I think...

...I think too much.

After tossing and turning for about an hour, I finally decide to send myself elsewhere. Late-night power hour's up, but my phone's still got plenty of juice left. I swipe through my friend list. Ernie would usually be my first choice (total night owl), except that right now he's dealing with a hysterical pregnancy. Nothing against Beta, but talking to a grown man wearing an Asian muscle hunk skin has been getting steadily creepier the longer he's lived in my bedroom. Eva's likely fast asleep, judging by her darkened, motionless feed. There's always the Semantic Web, bustling even at this hour, though I'm not necessarily in a communal mood. Shaka Brah's doing some teatime coding in the back of his van. I've kind of sort of come around to him since he helped me with my skin problem and is into *Star Trek*—but he's still a little too new for me to consider as kick-it material. That leaves Jan, who's last on my list for no particular reason. His feed is live-streaming the wall behind his bed, but I don't hear his usual snoring.

Hopeful, I text him:

**l33t_master:** Hey, what's up?

I also post a status update to my SuperMegaFeed:

**l33t_master:** Late night. Anyone want to hang?

While waiting for a reply, I change into my shorts and sit at my desk. I've taken to buying candles as of late, thank you very much, rolling power-ons, and have a small collection cluttering one corner of the desktop. I light one, then lean back with my hands clasped behind my head. It's weird seeing ancient flame and modern tech mingle like this. I'm surrounded by civilization—computer, phone, TV, video game consoles, electricity and Internet (when they're on), indoor plumbing—and yet me myself, relegated to boho attire, I feel like George of the Jungle inside a Best Buy. How long is the Mandate going to continue? Social distancing and skimping don't seem to have done anything to stop the dosequisvirus epidemic. You keep hearing about second or third wave this, rogue embers that. "We're all in this together!" Easy to say now, but what are we supposed to do when winter comes? Are Christmas bikinis going to be a thing?

Mini perches himself on my knee. "Do you have any playing cards handy?"

"Why?" I ask.

"I like having something to shuffle when I wait."

"Check the closet."

He scampers away.

I stare at my phone.

No response from Jan.

It's such a social media generation kind of tendency, but I just *have* to know if he's awake or asleep. Right now, this very instant. And so, tapping the "Visit" button beside Jan's name, I download into his parents' living room.

"*Psst!*" I hiss. "Jan! Are you up? It's Theo. I, uh, need someone to talk to." It's nearly pitch-black, save for the glow of Jan's phone, which lies plugged into a travel charger at the head of his bed (empty, I now realize). I pick up the phone; the touchscreen shows the inside of a...garden shed—?

Crap, is that the sound of the bedroom door opening?

Is that the flicker of a flashlight?

Is that one or both of Jan's parents rounding the turn in the hallway, about to enter the living room and discover their son's been replaced with an uninvited guest?

## Of All the Garden Sheds in All the World...

**@theo**

I swipe instinctively and download into what is indeed a garden shed. A surprisingly familiar-looking garden shed cluttered with tools, lumber, paint cans, dead Christmas trees—holy stinkin' crap.

*This is Thrill-Kill's garden shed!*

What the heck is Jan doing here?

I look around nervously. The place isn't much different from how I remember, except now there are a couple of gas lamps providing light. There's the overturned orange crate with Thrill-Kill's dilapidated ThinkPad hooked up to a car battery. There are the poop buckets lining the wall. There's the giant plywood panel at the back. Thrill-Kill's kidnapped Jan. I'm sure of it. She's kidnapped Jan and a bunch of random unfortunate neighborhood dudes, and has resurrected her crypto-crypt for them to slave away in. Unless there's been a mistake. SuperMegaNet *is* still beta software. My first time here was an accident, after all. I go over to the orange crate and, kneeling, check the buddy list on Thrill-Kill's laptop. Jan's name is on it. That means he added her—or she added him. And he's come here (or has been forced here) because...why?

I face the plywood panel, the one that, I know from past experience, hides the arched doorway leading down into Thrill-Kill's dungeon. I want to send myself back home this instant. However, I know if I do, I won't have the guts to download back after—and Jan could be in trouble. Besides, I have to return to his phone before I can return to mine. Doing so with his parents on the prowl might be the lesser of two evils, but it'll definitely be awkward. I don't like awkward.

Walking up to the plywood panel, I heft it aside. Then, before I can come up with anymore doubts, I force myself into the stairwell, carefully taking the steps one at a time, feeling along the wall as I go. An unholy breeze caresses my skin; the stone is warm beneath my bare feet; the darkness presses in. Is that...carnival music playing in the distance? I should go. I barely made it out alive the last time I was here. Yet I'm unable to turn back. I wonder, is it because I'm truly worried for Jan's well-being, or is it because I don't want to be ridiculed at his funeral for leaving him in the bowels of Thrill-Kill's back yard when I could've at least *tried* to mount a rescue? I'm seriously regretting having retired my Puck Martin skin. As embarrassing as the little tyke had been before, he'd also provided a sort of comfort. Like, if I were to battle someone video game boss style, it would be Puck taking the hits, and not me—whether or not skinning works that way. Roaming default, I feel

about as vulnerable as can be. Ernie likes to call me Goten, but I don't feel very Saiyan at all. Especially when, about two-thirds of the way down, I accidentally miss my footing, grab for a handrail that isn't there, and wind up tumbling head over heels the rest of the way. I arrive upside down and with a loud *thud!* at the cave entrance's wrought-iron gate, which has been lowered, and one of the bars of which has become firmly embedded between my battered butt cheeks.

"*Uuuuuuuuuhhh...?*" I moan.

Question mark intended.

Because on the other side of the gate...

...is something that wasn't there before, something that I can only describe as a carnival of pain and delight. As in an actual subterranean carnival. The combination of steampunk and woodcraft that is Thrill-Kill's human suffrage engine is still a central fixture, dark and foreboding as it churns tirelessly away. But all around the humble crypto-cave of yore has been upgraded and expanded, its torchlit chambers now packed with rides and booths and sideshows and wicked music thundering and people laughing, crying, screaming, grimy, bruised, battered, bloody, playing, beating, slicing, flaying—

"Who goes there?" asks a raspy voice to my right.

## Gatekeeper

**@theo**

I crane my neck to spy with my little eye this bespectacled, Leland Sklar-looking old man set up with a small desk and chair beside the cave entrance. On the wall behind him, sandwiched between a time clock and calendar, is an enormous, brooding, black and white mugshot of Cameron Beaumont from his *Puck Martin* days. In big, bold letters below: "BANNED." I'm guessing this has something to do with the, uh, unpleasantness during my last visit. I'm glad I stuck with my default skin after all if it means I won't be recognized.

"Speak up, lass," the old man prompts, squinting at me in the torchlight. "I haven't got all day."

*Lass?* I roll onto all fours, check for broken bones. "Um...er—"

"Yes? *Yes?*"

"I'm just, uh..." Think quick, dork! "...clocking in."

"Ah, why didn't you say so?" The old man nods, adjusts his glasses. "You must be Al's niece. Kirsty, right?"

"Um...that's right. Kirsty."

"He's told us all so much about you!"

I'm beginning to suspect this guy's eyesight is about as good as mine when I'm without my special contacts. "Only, um, good things, I hope?"

"Oh, of course, of course! Nice to finally put a face to the name."

"Yeah. Uh, nice to finally meet you too."

"But look here, don't you go letting me talk your ear off until the cows come home."

I do my best tween girl laugh—

"If you'll just give me the password, darling, I'll let you right in."

—and that's it. I'm done for. Found out, discovered, moments away from being tossed into the demogorgonzola's den. I've never had to guess a password before. The only reference I have for doing so is cheesy movies or TV shows where passwords are always "12345" or the first name of someone relevant. Which, I guess, is why I find myself replying with... "Rebbecca."

The old man frowns. "What did you say?"

Oh, God—

"Speak up, treats. I'm a little hard of hearing."

Was that the correct password, and he didn't hear it? Or was it incorrect, and he merely wants to confirm that it's incorrect? Should I say it again? Try something

new? Run like a mofo back up the stairs?

I clear my throat. "Um...Rebbecca?"

"Mm-hm," the old man says, shaking his head. "That's what I thought you said. It's a shame, too, because..." He reaches for a giant lever that's been installed behind his desk. "...that's...*correct!*" He yanks the lever.

—and I nearly jump out of my skin as the gate jolts alive, rolling upward.

The old man leans back, cackling amusedly as all old folks do. "I'm just yanking your chain, princess. You're good to go."

"Thanks," I tell him, getting to my feet. His laughter follows me as I stumble into the cave.

# Bloodcoin

**@theo**

Not three steps in, a woman in an official-looking swimsuit approaches me, waves at my torso. "Have you redeemed any of this?"

"Huh?"

"The injuries."

"Oh. Um...no, but I was just about to—"

"No problem. Let me tally you up." She holds up her tablet, taps something out as she looks me up and down. "Minor bruising, ruffled hair, slight limp, offended butt crack. Four Bloodcoin." She tears off four tickets from the dispenser attached to her waist, hands them to me. "Don't forget to cash in at the redemption booth. And word of advice, don't be afraid to dirty up the bod, lose a tooth, maybe get a black eye or bloody nose."

I nod.

The ticket chick gives my torso one last glance, and then she drops me like a bad habit, runs over to the booth nearby, where some guy has just injured himself playing Greeting Card Paper-Cut (according to the sign).

Tickets in hand, I wander, agape, aghast. Wheezy Mellotron music plays over the PA. Besides the obvious attractions, like Russian roulette, Chinese Water Torture, a carousel centrifuge, and Bobbing for Crabs, there's Barefoot Rusty Nail Safari, Broken Mic Night, Completely Average First-Graders Perform "Hot Cross Buns," Möbius Queue, The Better Never Than Late Cafe, A Series of Unfortunate Events, Shaky Cam Footage Theater, The Frozen Status Bar, and Chipotle—among many, many others. Many visitors are grimy, singed, bloodied, their swimsuits tattered or missing altogether. That's to be expected when attending a human suffrage carnival, I guess. And what a carnival it is. As far as I can tell, all the games and rides are designed to hurt or humiliate. You earn tickets (issued by entrepreneuring ushers like the one who tallied me) for your pain, which you can then redeem for Bloodcoin. I'm assuming Thrill-Kill and her ex-husbands are taking a cut. Instead of mining Bloodcoin themselves, they've set up a carnival and are letting the masses mine for them. The whole thing is pretty devious, if you ask me.

After wandering the milling crowds for several minutes (there must be several hundred people in attendance, none of whom have brought their spray bottles, none of whom are social distancing), I find Jan over at the Expired Delicacies booth. The good news is, he doesn't look like he's been kidnapped. The bad news

is, he's pixelated and puking miserably into a bucket.

Jan.

Attending a human suffrage carnival in Thrill-Kill's Bloodcoin dungeon.

Puking into a bucket.

## Expired Delicacies

**@theo**

I walk up to the booth.

"Welcome to Expired Delicacies!" greets the dude behind the counter. "Would you like to try our new Fuzzy Milk blended drink? Double your Bloodcoin if you can keep it down!"

I wave him away, tap Jan on the shoulder.

He turns around, wipes a hearty dollop of vomit from his chin. He's got a sizable wad of tickets clutched tightly in his free hand. "Theo? What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm mining Bloodcoin."

"I can see that."

Jan motions for me to follow him out of earshot of the Expired Delicacies dude. Then he leans in close and says, "I've been sneaking in through the garden shed with my augmented bytes disabled so that the Ex-Husbands don't recognize me. That way I don't have to pay the admission fee." He nods at me. "I didn't know you were into Bloodcoin, though."

"That's because I'm not." I glance back at the booth; some poor sucker's just ordered a Fuzzy Milk. "I saw your SuperMegaFeed and thought you were in trouble. How long have you been coming here?"

"A while."

"Do your parents know this place exists?"

"They barely know *I* exist."

"And you're...cool with, uh, making your money this way?"

"Why not?"

"Maybe because it's *crazy*."

Jan faces me full, folds his arms. There's still a dab of vomit on his pixelated chin. "What's crazy?"

"I mean, all those unexplained bruises and Band-Aids showing up on you recently, I knew something was up, but I never could've seen *this* coming."

"It's an opportunity. I took it."

"Drinking Fuzzy Milk is an *opportunity*?"

"Well, not the milk so much. But the other attractions..." Jan holds up his tickets. Even pixelated, his battered arms are starting to look like over-ripened bananas. "I've mined fifty Bloodcoin so far tonight."

I shake my head. "Are you hearing yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've got cuts and bruises, you're drinking sour milk—"

"Fuzzy Milk."

"As if that's any better!"

Jan goes quiet.

So do I.

In the background, rides groan. People scream in agony. The Mellotron hiccups in the middle of a melancholy tune. Smoke hangs heavy in the torchlight.

"I need the money," Jan says at last.

I try to come up with something meaningful, something that will convince him to drop what he's doing and download back home with me. Instead, I just sort of make this exasperated choking noise, followed by, "What about the demogorgonzola?"

"Oh, it's in the Champion's Pit."

"Terrific. Fantastic. There's a demogorgonzola in the *Champion's Pit*, and I'm supposed to *not* think any of this is absolutely bat-crap crazy?"

"You wouldn't understand. You're rich."

More exasperation. "Why does everyone say that?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"I'm not rich," I insist. "I'm...well off, sure, but not *rich*."

"What's the difference?"

"One's for people with, um, comfortable amounts of money. The other's for the one-percenters who live in giant mansions and drive fancy sports cars and have YouTube channels and shop exclusively at overpriced boutiques."

Jan nods. "You mean white people."

"No, I mean *affluent* people."

"Yeah—'white' is slang for affluent."

I frown. "No offense, but you're whiter than I am—"

"I'm *European*."

"—so, by your argument, shouldn't you be rich?"

Jan shakes his head. "I'm *Czech*. Being 'white' has nothing to do with skin color or race anymore. It's slang for rich, affluent, entitled."

"When did this happen?"

"I think when Trump became president."

## Going For Woke

**@theo**

"Okay, well, I'm definitely not white or affluent or whatever."

Jan's expression softens a tad. "Maybe not, but you *do* have a lot of white things. Money. Nice house. Nice phone. Making it with Asia Afrodesia."

Oh, for crying out— "I feel I should point out that we didn't do anything except kiss and take creepy photos."

"That's not what the Internet says."

"Since when has the Internet ever said anything meaningful?"

"Hm. Point. Still, I can't help feeling...margined whenever we hang out together."

"You mean *marginalized*."

Jan throws his hands in the air. "Even my words are inferior!"

"They're not inferior," I say. "English just isn't your first language."

"And that's the problem. I'm tired of not quite grasping the words, of not quite having enough money, of always having to be secondary to others. I'm tired of Ernie calling me 'dirty Czech.'"

"I can guarantee he'd call you that even if you made a million bucks a year."

Jan looks away. "It doesn't matter. I'm finished being the poor kid of the group."

"You're not the poor kid of the group."

"Except I am."

I look away, too. "What do you think goes on when the rest of us aren't hanging out with you? Like, we sit around going over the Runt Squad ledger? Who paid what, where, and when, and then we take turns complaining about how much or how little you contributed?" I sigh. "When I first started high school, I was terrified. I didn't know anybody. I was anxious and alone, and I didn't have any friends. I'd *never* had any friends before you guys. I can't tell you how much it means to me that I know you. I don't care about money or class or how many followers you have on Facebook or whatever. None of us cares, Jan."

"Yeah, well, *I* do."

"You shouldn't."

"Theo?"

"Yeah?"

"That's totally something a white person would say." Jan shakes his head. "How come it's okay for rich people to pursue money and wealth, but when a poor

person pursues the same thing, they're told not to bother? How come when you're rich the pursuit of money is all about being affirmative and resourceful and living your best life, but when you're poor it's always 'money doesn't make the man, money doesn't buy happiness, you should be satisfied with your life the way it already is?'"

It's not the worst advice in the world—but I don't dare say that for fear of Jan thinking I'm exercising some kind of privilege.

"My point is," he goes on, "it's easier to be happy with yourself when you already have the things you want."

OMG. Are Jan and I...are we having an argument?

Jan seems to be wondering the same thing, and faces me.

Will I earn any Bloodcoin if he decides to punch me in the face?

"You should go," he says after a sec. "I've got some more mining to do before I call it a night. Also, the Ex-Husbands are managers now, and aren't big fans of the ruckus we caused the last time we were here. Use the garden shed entrance. Old Bagu can't see or hear for shizzle."

I glance nervously over my shoulder. I'm in my default skin now, but that doesn't mean I can't still be found out—and I definitely don't want to be found out, not by a bunch of lunatic Ex-Husbands who run a Bloodcoin carnival.

"Here." I hand over my Bloodcoin tickets.

"What's this for?" Jan asks.

"I'm never going to use them."

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay. Um...thanks."

I start to turn away—

Jan stops me. "Theo?"

"Yeah?"

"Do me a favor and keep my, er, night job a secret?"

Feeling lost and confused and several shades worse than before I'd left in the first place, I nod and head back the way I came.

## Not-So-Secret Sauce

**@eva**

Download to Theo's place on any given night, and it's not unheard of to find him sitting at the edge of his bed with his hands on his knees, a worried expression on his face. Tonight, though, he looks downright constipated. And...scuffed?

"I saw your SuperMegaFeed update," I say. "What's the matter—?"

"Jan's mining Bloodcoin!" he blurts, and lets out a long, satisfied lungful of air, as if he'd been holding his breath waiting for me to get here.

"What?"

"I caught him down in Thrill-Kill's dungeon crypto-cave. She's turned it into a full-time carnival with rides and games and expired food and he told me not to tell anyone but I'm so bad with secrets I just *had* to get it off my chest and you'll keep it between the two of us, right, *right?*"

I narrow my eyes. "Jan's mining Bloodcoin?"

Theo nods.

"In Thrill-Kill's garden shed dungeon?"

He nods again.

"After her crappy ex-husbands tried to sacrifice me to their demogorgonzola?"

Theo hangs his head. He might actually be taking a dump at this point.

"Oh, *hell* no." I grab his phone instinctively and swipe through his SMN buddy list.

"What're you doing?" he asks, suspicious.

Still sixty-percent charged? Good. I stop at Jan's name. "I'm going to have a little talk with our good friend Mr. Kounicova."

"You can't! I promised him I'd keep his secret!"

"Well, I didn't, so..." I swipe out. The candlelit Zen of Theo's bedroom is replaced with the cluttered stench of Mrs. Thrailkill's garden shed. Those gross poop buckets alone should be enough to make me seriously doubt the authenticity of my conviction. But I'm also in full-on scolding mode, and between that, Ernie's hysterical pregnancy, Theo baring rack, dosequisvirus, the Santanas, and the stupid Boho Mandate in general, I'm not thinking too clearly. Straight to the back and down the stairwell I go; past the snoozing old dude and his enormous monkey-boy wanted poster (he wakes at the sound of me throwing the gate lever, but by the time he realizes what's happening I've already ducked through and sprinted away); into the dusky subterranean freak show that is Thrill-Kill's crypto-carnival. I don't need to describe it to you; I'm sure Theo's already done so in great detail. Needless

to say, it's one-hundred-percent messed up that Jan would even *consider* considering spending time here.

I find him lifting bulky furniture in the Unpaid Mover Simulator. He spots me standing off to the side with my hands on my hips, my foot tapping impatiently on the ground.

"Theo told you, didn't he?" Jan says once he's set down the coffee table he'd been carrying and joined me outside the simulator.

"You really shouldn't give the little bugger secrets to keep," I reply.

"I realize that. Now."

## Dungeon Kiss

**@eva**

"You also shouldn't be keeping secrets like this in the first place. I mean, what are you *doing* here?"

Jan wipes some of the sweat and grime from his forehead. "I'm earning a living."

"By mining *Bloodcoin* of all things?"

He spreads his arms. "My parents don't make any money. I'm too young to get a regular job. What do you want me to say?"

"After what Thrill-Kill's insane ex-husbands did to me—to *us?* Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'd like for you to say that you're never going to have anything to do with this place ever again."

Though the ambient misery does a pretty good job at masking our conversation, Jan nevertheless leans in and switches to a murmur: "The Husbands put us through a big deal. I figure they owe us for that. And it's not like I'm friends with them or anything. I sneak down here and mine my own business." He laughs. "Get it?"

"Mine Bloodcoin if you must, just don't do it *here*."

"Hey, kid!" the sim operator yells, annoyed. "Are you going to finish or what?"

Jan straightens, smiles apologetically at me. "I have to go, Eva." He starts to turn away.

And I don't know what else to say, so I grab him by the shoulder—and give him a big ol' kiss.

On the mouth.

Cuz...I don't know, it works in the movies? The girl's talking to the guy, and she's trying to get him to do something, or *not* do something, and he's just not getting it. So, she surprises him with a kiss, and it's like something switches on inside him, he totally understands her now, he's on her side, his mind is clear, his intentions righteous. I'm hoping it'll be something like that with Jan. However, when we break it off, he just looks like I've farted. I've kissed two boys in my thirteen years: Theo and, now, Jan. With Theo, awkward as it had been, at least one of us had been really into it. With Jan, it's just lips on lips, and absolutely nothing else. Well, nothing but the taste of onions.

"Sorry," Jan apologizes. "I had a clamburger before you got here."

*Ew.* "I'm going to go."

Now it's Jan's turn to grab my shoulder. "Hey, seriously, don't mention this to

anyone."

"I'm not the one you have to worry about."

Jan sighs, slouches his mighty shoulders. "Theo?"

I nod. "Telling that boy is like telling TMZ. You're probably already on his latest SuperMegaStatus."

"Ah, well."

"Are you really going to spend the rest of your night here?"

"Most of it, yeah."

"And there's nothing I can do to talk you out of it?"

"Nope."

"Then I guess...don't hurt yourself too much."

"I'm not a crypto-junkie, Eva."

"Really, now?"

"Really."

"Just..." I bite my lip. "...can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

*Har-har.* "Don't take this the wrong way, but what's up with you? You never seem to be into any of the girls at school, and just now, when we kissed...are you, like, gay?"

"No."

"I mean, I know you aren't into me. I just...how come I feel like I was Lea Thompson kissing Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future*?"

"Well, for one thing, look around you. This isn't exactly the kind of place for romance."

True.

"Also, you're not my type."

"Retro bikini beach babes, huh?"

Jan nods. "Checkers."

"So...if I switched to a string bikini and got an epic perm, how much of a chance in hell would I have?" Sadly, I'm half serious.

Jan looks vaguely intrigued—but that's about it, because suddenly Thrill-Kill's surviving Husbands are standing around us arms folded, brows furrowed.

*Dun-dun-duuunnn.*

# Banned

**@eva**

"I knew I recognized her," says one Husband to another. He points at me. "That's the girl we offered to the demogorgonzola, remember?"

The other Husband goes wide-eyed. "Oh, my God—she killed Kenny!"

(Did a handful of notes from the *South Park* theme just play over the PA?)

"You've got a lot of nerve showing your face around here after what you did."

"Nah-ah," I say, folding my arms and furrowing my brow to match the Husbands. "Your stupid *demogorgonzola* did all the killing."

"*You* interrupted the sacrifice."

"Excuse you? That's what people *do* when they're kidnapped and offered up as monster bait!"

Jan nudges me in the ribs. "Uh, maybe you shouldn't provoke them—"

Ignoring him, I fold and furrow a little harder. "What are you going to do? Feed me to the demogorgonzola again?"

The first Husband glowers at me. "Not this time, kid. No, this time we're going to do..." He leans in. "...something much worse."

Crap—

He reaches into his satchel.

—we're going to die.

And pulls out...a cell phone. Holds it up. Takes our photo. "You are hereby banned for life from Thrailkill's Garden Shed Crypto-Carnival. Any Bloodcoin earned will be reclaimed immediately and returned to the ledger. If we catch you here again, we'll turn you over to Thrailkill herself."

"Bring it!" I dare. Fold, furrow, and so forth.

Jan maneuvers behind me. At first I'm assuming it's because he's decided to do the feminist, post-chivalric thing and use me as a human shield, but the way he's twisting his hips out of the way makes it even more obvious: he's trying to hide the wad of suffrage tickets stuffed into his Speedo. It's too little too late, though. One of the Husbands confiscates the tickets, shoves Jan forward. Me too. All the way back to Bagu at the cave entrance. While two of the Husbands hold us with our hands behind our backs, the third helps Bagu update the drivers for the crusty Epson printer beside his desk. Then the two of them print out our headshots so that now it's me, Jan, and Puck Martin on Bagu's Wall of Shame.

"There," says the Husband.

I raise an eyebrow. "Why did you have us watch you put those up?"

"To make a point."

"What, that your cheap printer needs a color ink cartridge?"

Jan stomps my foot.

I stomp him back.

The Husbands bring us back up to the garden shed. Jan pleads with them along the way, more than once pointing out that being banned from mining Bloodcoin is in itself a form of suffrage, and so should be worth compensation. But the Husbands aren't listening. They stand us in front of Thrailkill's ThinkPad, return us to Jan's darkened living room.

He glares at me in the phonelight. "Thanks for that."

Before I can get a word out, he sends me home. I stand dumbfounded in my bedroom. I've never known Jan to be upset at anyone. But that look in his eyes just then...he was *furious*. I did him a *favor* getting him banned, and he's treating me like I stabbed him in the back. This is *so* messed up! Even more messed up is me, showering and dressing down for bed and afterward lighting some candles and posing in front of my full-length mirror because I need to know if any aspect of my physique might somehow fit Jan's definition of hot. Alas, I'm not retro enough.

I lie in bed and imagine Ernie sitting bloated and pregnant in front of his computer. I picture Theo entering modeling contests. I recall Jan at that stupid moving simulator booth. And I think to myself, what *has* happened to the Runt Squad of my youth?

# Big Richard Blues

**@mike**

We're *trying* to get it on. That's the problem. Twenty minutes in, though, it becomes obvious that while the spirit may be willing, the flesh is weak. Eventually, I stop trying entirely and simply glance bleary-eyed at Anya, the space between us becoming a chasm. Don't get me wrong, I'm in good enough shape. But Anya's in *great* shape, on the fitter side of fit. She looks twenty; I feel forty.

"Babe," she complains, slightly out of breath. "Don't stop now."

I consider soldiering on, but I can already feel my groin going from NC-17 to merely Rated-R. "We need to talk."

"Can't it wait?" Anya pays me a pleading look.

"Not really."

"Are you sure?"

"Is he, you know...*ours*?"

Anya buries her face in the pillow, works herself against me, hopeful. Really, though, it's just a formality at this point. "You're *still* thinking about *that*?"

"He doesn't look like either of us—"

"Not all kids look exactly like their parents."

"—and his...well, I only got an accidental peek last night and I'm still seeing stars."

"It's only temporary—"

"'Tonight On *Jerry Springer*—my teenage son is better at math, earns more money, and has a brighter crotch than me!'"

Anya lets out a long, dissatisfied sigh and settles beside me. "Could we *please* not talk about our son's crotch while making love?"

"Where does he get it from, Anya? Certainly not from *me*." There, I said it.

"It may interest you to know that Ivanovich basements tend toward the metaphysical." Realizing that by referencing her own family's novelty she's indirectly insinuating a lack of novelty in mine, Anya adds, "He's thirteen, Mike. Naturally, everything about him seems precocious. He'll eventually grow into himself. By the time he's in college he'll be perfectly adjusted for a young man his age, and all of this silly awkwardness will be long forgotten."

I sit at the edge of the bed and pat the bruises around my eyes. Why exposure to Theo's crotch results in facial contusions is another matter entirely, and probably something that needs eventual medical and/or metaphysical attention. But I'm only vaguely concerned about that at the moment.

Anya scoots beside me, takes my hand, strokes the side of my face. She leans in for a kiss—

—I brush her away.

"You're moping," Anya says.

"I'm not...*moping*," I lie.

"Mike."

"Anya."

"*Mike*." Anya folds her arms and waits.

I stare into the candlelight. "It's not Theo's basement that bothers me. Not *just* his basement, anyway. It's what it represents."

"What, his growing up? Our growing older?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. He's just...better than me in so many ways. I feel like I'm not a father figure anymore so much as I'm a figurehead. A patriarch without any real power. He's supposed to look up to me. Instead, I'm looking up to *him*, wishing *I* got straight A's in school, wishing *I* made bank designing Web sites from my bedroom. I've gone from dad to fanboy this past year. The basement thing, it simply puts everything into perspective. It's also...it's you, too."

Anya murmurs sarcastically, "You're not going to tell me you resent my crotch too, are you?"

An introspective David Darling song begins playing; a spotlight cuts through the semi-darkness and follows me as I leave the bed, slowly pace the length of the bedroom. "I've been thinking about this for a while. It was the Boho Mandate that made it obvious. We were out shopping the other day—you, me, Theo—and I caught our reflection in the side of a building. There were the three of us in our swimsuits. Or, rather, I should say there were the two of you, affluent, athletic, successful. There was me, middle-aged, soft, out-of-place. That's when it hit me. I'm subpar."

"Because we make more money? Because you think we look better skimping?"

"Both of you are self-made success stories. Me? I'm just an office jockey who likes to cook, and who has the junk in his trunk to prove it. You see our family on the street, and it's obvious who the odd man out is."

"Who?" asks Anya. "Who are these people seeing us out on the street?"

"You know. *People*. Society."

"And we should care what they think because...?"

"Because it's the way the world works."

Anya shakes her head. "I still don't know where you're going with this."

"I can't stay here anymore." I stop at the window, peer out into the post-power hour darkness. "I have to get away, clear my head, wear some *clothes*, for Christ's sake. Go on a vacation out of state. Right now. This instant."

"The power's out till morning."

"Only in San Angelico."

"But I have clients lined up for at least the next month. And Theo has school. You've got work—"

"There are places in this world," I interrupt, "where you only have to wear a

mask or get a vaccine to deal with dosequisvirus." I gesture at my bare torso. "We don't have to live like this, Anya."

"Come back to bed," she says. "We'll talk about it in the morning. We'll figure this out."

"That's just it. We're always going to *talk* about these things in the morning, but the morning never comes." I think for a moment. "Figuratively, I mean."

"*Let's talk about it tomorrow.*"

The music stops; the spotlight fades.

I blow out the candles, return to bed. "Yeah," I say, and climb between the sheets. "Tomorrow."

But I've already decided.

# Mike Shady

**@theo**

"Grab your spray bottle. We're going shopping."

That's all Dad had said when he'd found me in the kitchen nursing a bowl of after-school gluten-and-sugar-free organic Chocolate Schnauzers. A short while later, we're headed south on Main Street. I'm sitting wordless in the passenger seat of Dad's Leaf, no clue exactly where we're going or why. Adding to the mystery, Dad's being unusually melancholy. Moody. Pensive. Elusive, at the very least. When I ask, he mentions the mall. Which store? We'll know when we get there. Why are we shopping? Because. It's Wednesday afternoon; isn't everything closed until dinnertime power-on? We'll see.

This is about my crotch. I'm sure of it. Dad's eyes and ears may have stopped bleeding since my towel-drop the other night, but his soul is still seared. The damage is done. I've literally grown too big for my own britches, and now he has no choice but to abandon me at the edge of town that I might be adopted by a gang of circus freaks forever cursed to wander the open road offering cheap tricks in exchange for food and lodging.

I stare out the window. The city whooshes past. You know that random mid-week disconnect you experience when riding in your mom or dad's car on the way to something or somewhere that used to be completely ordinary, but which is now almost surreal thanks to DOSVID-19, rolling power-ons, and the Boho Mandate? I'm experiencing it now. San Angelico is so different these days, and yet the same. People are still out and about; they've still got their phones and lattes and selfie sticks. They're just six feet apart and are sporting designer boho attire. Everyone's afraid of getting sick or catching fire, but they can't stay home anymore than they can stay off social media. Concrete and bare skin, me and Dad strapped fragile and shirtless inside this sophisticated meld of electronics and machinery bearing the Nissan name. Ernie was right: we've all become suburban savages.

Dad, it turns out, isn't abandoning me after all. We pull up to the mall parking lot, most of which has been converted into an outdoor marketplace—no doubt the management's strategy to beat the rolling power-ons and social distancing requirements by relocating all the stores outside. We end up parking a block into the neighborhood across the street and walking the rest of the way. I feel like we're at the swap meet. Merchants are using phone credit card readers and travel chargers, paper receipts and ledgers—whatever it takes to ring up customers grid-adjacent between now and dinnertime power hour. Someone's taken it upon

themselves to ensure Fleetwood Mac's "Little Lies" is playing over the PA (I'm cool with the Mac, but why is that song *always* present at every mall that ever was?).

We wind up at the GimmeGimme booth. Robbie the Friendly Pervert is still somehow employed as greeter, and while he doesn't seem to recognize me without my Puck Martin skin, he nevertheless makes it totally obvious he's checking me out as he sprays me down. "Today only, buy five, get one half-off on any item in-store!" he proclaims.

I smile uncomfortably and make my way into the booth, wander down a few aisles before I become aware Dad's not behind me. In fact, he's not in the booth at all, but is still standing out front and talking in hushed tones with Robbie. I pick up a pack of WKRP *chibi* keychains, distantly interested in the Johnny Fever. When I glance at the front of the booth once more, Dad's now got his phone out, and is explaining something in great detail. There's *no* way he's making some kind of shady deal with Robbie the Friendly Friggin' Pedobear...is there? A dozen yucky scenarios pop into my head, one of which involves a revised version of Dad's abandonment plan where instead of leaving me at the edge of town, he sells me to Robbie.

Back to the box of keychains. I'll look up again in a sec, and Dad will be standing over by the *Food Wars!* display, as if he'd been there all along, and I'll breathe a sigh of relief realizing I was overreacting as usual. One...two...*three!*

Robbie's gone. *Dad's* gone.

They've left the GimmeGimme booth.

Together.

# What Goes On Behind Closed Curtains

**@theo**

"How is that guy not in prison?" asks Mini, who's appeared unexpectedly on one of my shoulders. "Or don't junior plush crotch shots found on a grown man's phone count for anything anymore?"

Oh, yeah. That's right. Mini tried to get Robbie arrested that one time.

"You think your dad's a closet veal fanatic?"

"Veal?"

"Yeah, you know, young meat—"

"*Ew!*" I pluck Mini from my shoulder and start to exclaim further—when I notice that I'm being noticed. There's this little boy with a perturbed look on his face standing beside me.

"Where'd you get the puppet?" he asks, nodding at Mini.

Mini puts on an authoritative air. "See, when a boy enters puberty, and his spunk begins to—"

I jam Mini into my shorts pocket. Then, realizing I've just created what very much resembles a giant boner, I yank him back out.

"*Mmf,*" he mumbles, and picks something from his mouth. "I *hate* pocket lint."

Without another word, I hurry past the kid and exit GimmeGimme. "Do you *have* to be so crude in public?" I ask Mini once we're out of the suddenly-sweltering booth and back under bright blue sky.

"I'm a talking plush doll powered by spunk," Mini replies. "How sophisticated do you think I'm supposed to be? Besides, it's fun to mess with people."

"But you just traumatized that kid for no reason."

"Hey, I didn't *traumatize* anyone. Childhood innocence is an antiquated myth that's single-handedly handicapped generations of younglings. Sex, violence, religion, and politics are some day coming for that poor soul. Better to educate him sooner rather than later. And anyway, you don't know him. Maybe in fifteen years he'll become the computer programmer responsible for ransomware that brings about the digital apocalypse, in which case he *so* deserves my tough love."

I narrow my eyes. "Maybe your traumatizing him *now* is what causes him to bring about the digital apocalypse *later*. Did you ever think of that?"

"Whoa." Mini looks thoughtful. "*Bruh.*"

I nod affirmatively, sling him against my hip and start walking. He flops obnoxiously with each step, but I ignore him and look around for Dad, peering

into booth after booth and again entertaining the idea that he's abandoned me—here at the shopping mall instead of at the edge of town, but abandoned nonetheless. I'm about to text him (I don't know why I didn't do that first) when I happen to pass the photo booth just as the curtain rustles aside. Dad and Robbie step out and shake hands.

Robbie winks and blows my behind a kiss before departing.

"What's going on?" I ask, watching him go.

"I'll explain on the way home," Dad replies.

Back in the car, I buckle myself into the passenger seat, then fold my arms, stare at Dad with all the intensity of a *Star Trek* tractor beam. "Dad, *what's going on?*"

He sits motionless behind the wheel and fidgets. Looks embarrassed.

"You know that Robbie guy is into little dudes, right?"

More fidgeting, maybe some mild concern.

"He drove all the way from Oregon just to meet up with...uh..." I was about to explain how he'd been *en route* to Ernie's butthole, and how Mini and Jan had tried framing him by putting pics of Mini's wang onto his phone, but now I'm thinking better of it. "...well, you know, I heard he's into weird stuff and...stuff—are you going to tell me what's going on or what?"

Dad sighs. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a pair of small droppers.

I recognize them immediately.

They're the same kind of droppers I'd used for my New Eyes once upon a time.

## Big Drops

**@theo**

"Are those nano drops?" I ask as if oblivious to the prominent black-and-white labels reading, "Big Bod" and "Big Dong," respectively.

"Yeah," Dad replies.

"*That's* why we came to the mall?" To buy nano drops from a guy who gives out Best Tail awards to lucky little monkey-boys whose rear ends he fancies?

"That's why we came to the mall."

Wait—is this some kind of ironic punishment? Like, the shock of me using New Eyes and going blind has finally worn off for my parents, and now Dad's putting me through some kind of test designed to convince me of the err of my ways? "So...you're going to take nano drops?"

"Does it hurt or feel weird or anything?" Dad asks.

I squirm in my seat. "Not really. I took mine before bed, and when I woke up they'd done their work. But I just did the eye drops and not...Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you taking Big Bod?" And Big Dong?

Dad examines the droppers, turning them over in his hands. "I want to look good in a Speedo." When he sees that I'm not laughing—or smiling, even—he adds, "Because I don't want to be one of those people who complains about something without ever *doing* anything about it."

"Oh." I go quiet for a sec, watching a random boho babe livestream her way out of a nearby house and down the street. "What does that mean?"

Dad also watches the boho babe. "It means...well, look at it this way. You don't like a shirt? You change it, right?" He holds up the Big Bod, the Big Dong. "That's what this is."

I bite my lip. "I changed my shirt once. I'm blind because of it."

"You found a workaround."

"And it keeps me up every night worrying that my special contacts will die or get misplaced, or I'll get ransomware demanding a million dollars to unlock my eyesight."

"Your contacts can get ransomware?"

"Anything with a computer in it can get ransomware."

"Yet despite the risk, we use computers everyday."

"If you want to look different, you could just install a skin."

"I don't want to have to go virtual or rely on Wi-Fi. I want to be actual."

I shake my head. “Aren’t *dads* supposed to be the ones trying to talk *sons* out of doing crazy stuff with emerging technologies?”

## Tastes Like Raspberries

**@theo**

Dad stares out the driver's side window. "Theo, I'm going to give you some advice on giving advice. It's all about those who have everything telling those who have nothing to be happy where they are. It's lonely at the top. Money doesn't buy happiness. Beauty is only skin-deep. You are you, bloom where you're planted, be grateful for what you have. It could be worse. Basically, suck it up and stay put. Meanwhile, it's okay for these people to pursue the very things they insist are so unnecessary. If it's so bad being rich, why pursue financial wealth? If it's so bad being beautiful, why bother shaving or showering or getting a haircut or going to the gym? After a while, you realize it's actually *not* so bad. You look around and realize you're *missing out*. And you start to think, why should you do everything the hard way, the painful way, the antiquated way when all around you the masses are availing themselves?" Dad looks at me enviously. "I idolize you and Anya, you know that? I mean, Jesus. Young, smart, successfully self-employed, straight-A's in school. The world is literally your oyster. Me? I'm watching you flourish while I'm just floundering. I don't want to be anyone else or live anyone else's life. But I *do* want to...partake. I want to indulge before I'm old and lonely and wondering why I didn't ever *try* anything."

Wow. Dad and Jan should really do a podcast together one of these days. I always thought the two of them as chill with themselves, immune to the social forces that have kept my generation locked in a perpetual gym-Facebook-gym-Instagram cycle. That Dad's so self-conscious about his, well, packaging is nothing short of a revelation. I can't help but think of Shaka Brah. Woman in her late thirties who identifies as a boho boy. You could argue that deepfaking hasn't freed him at all, but instead made him reliant on a technological crutch. Is he really better for it now, or does he just *think* he's better? In other words, is what he's feeling a product of the Shaka Brah skin, or is pretending to be a teenage Blaze Masterson merely enabling a confidence that was there all along?

"It doesn't matter, Dad," I murmur after a while. "It shouldn't matter, anyway." That's sound advice, right?

"If it doesn't matter," Dad says, "then why did you get New Eyes?"

I dodge the question with another: "What does Mom think?"

"She's...she'll adjust."

That doesn't sound promising. "So, what do we do now?"

Dad shrugs and holds up the Big droppers again. "You're supposed to take

these with someone present just in case they…disagree with you."

In other words, I'm to keep him from swallowing his tongue as well as make sure the ER gets his insurance information should he mutate into some kind of farting, squirting, grotesque Chet Donnelly in *Weird Science*.

"Bottoms up." Dad uncaps the droppers, downs the contents of one, then the other. Wipes his mouth unnecessarily. Checks his reflection in the rear-view mirror. "How do I look?"

"Like you," I reply.

"Huh. Tastes like raspberries."

# Big Daddy

**@theo**

Dad's new muscles and genitalia don't kick in immediately. After swearing me to secrecy (it's not like Mom's going to notice her husband's suddenly got Big Bod—and Big Dong—or anything), he drives us back home. I finish my homework. Mom wraps up a session with her last client of the day. Dinnertime power hour rolls around, and Dad summons us to the kitchen to charge our phones, tablets, and laptops over homemade vegan street tacos. Nobody talks much. It's a calm-before-the-storm kind of thing, and I'm not sure if Mom already knows about the nano drops and is staging a silent protest, or if she *doesn't* know and is simply reacting to Dad's weirdness with...more weirdness. Afterward, I'm happy to sequester myself in my bedroom to work on a Web site project until bedtime so as to not be around when the poo hits the fan. But nothing happens. The house is quieter tonight than it's ever been. By late-night power hour I've forgotten my little trip to the mall altogether.

Then Thursday morning hits.

Like, I'm literally jolting awake in bed, not to the chime of my alarm, but to the sound of Mom screaming from the other room.

Mini, already into a Tai Chi session, nods at me from his miniature yoga mat on the floor. "I think the Big drops finally worked their magic."

I sit up, rubbing my face, ruffling my hair, trying to listen.

"Weird, huh?" Mini stares at the wall separating my room from my parents'. "I don't *need* to see anything, I don't *want* to see anything, but I must. *We* must, mustn't we?"

Something thuds loudly. My parents' bedroom door opens, closes, opens again, closes again. Footsteps sound down the stairs.

I throw back the blanket and pad carefully out into the hall. I squat at the head of the staircase, listening in the shadows. I'm guessing Mom and Dad have gone into the studio for privacy, but I can still totally hear them arguing. Why do parents do that? They make a point of going into another part of the house to yell at each other, but they don't even bother closing the door behind them. You end up hearing everything anyway:

"*Would you relax, Anya? It's me.*"

"*What did you...how did this...what's going on with those? What happened to that?*"

A brief silence during which I imagine Dad dropping his undies and proudly

revealing his shiny new Big Dong. "*It turned out pretty well, don't you think?*"

"*For goodness' sake, Mike, close the door before Theo sees you!*"

The studio door slides shut.

Without hesitation, I descend the stairs, crouching at the bottom with one hand gripping the banister. Mom and Dad's muffled voices are indecipherable.

"Here," Mini says, and hands me a stethoscope.

"Where did you...?"

"Talking plush doll. Suspension of disbelief. So forth."

"Easy for you to say!" I hiss. I cross the hall and press the scope against the studio door. It sounds like Mom is lighting candles (it's not quite morning power hour).

"*...you can't blame me. It's so big—all of you is so...big.*"

"*Big good, or Big Pharma?*"

"*Big question: what the heck is going on, Mike?*"

"*I took some nano drops.*"

Hear that?

I think someone just dropped a pin.

# Eavesdropping

**@theo**

"Dude," Mini whispers, "your mom's giving your dad the most epic stink-eye right now."

I glance down at him questioningly. "Since when are you able to see through walls?"

"I don't have to see her—just listen to the silence. Literally the textbook definition of a nine-months-pregnant pause."

I eavesdrop some more:

"*Judging by the look on your face, I'm going to say you're not a fan.*"

"*I'm...at a loss, Mike. Isn't this something we should've talked about beforehand?*"

"*We talked about it the other night.*"

"*Um, I think I'd remember endorsing epic muscles and a monster wang.*"

*Ew.* My mom said "wang."

"*Maybe we didn't talk about the logistics in particular, but the end result was the same: I want to change, to improve myself. To finally drag myself kicking and screaming into the twenty-twenties.*"

"*By becoming a caricature?*"

"*Not my choice word, but okay.*"

"*You don't even fit in your shorts anymore.*"

"*You're missing the point—*"

"*Are you sure it's not* you *who's missed it?*"

Another pregnant pause.

"*Mike, is this about your not being able to maintain an erection?*"

*Ewww.* Dad boner. Or lack thereof.

"*No, it's more than—*"

"*Oh, my God—is this about Theo's basement?*"

Wait, what now?

"*Don't be silly, Anya. It's not that. Well, it's mostly not that.*"

"*I can't believe I'm hearing this.*"

Neither can I!

"*What, that I'm working to improve myself?*"

Really? My basement rendered Dad impotent? *Really?*

"*Is this an improvement, though?*"

"*Oh, I see.*"

"*What?*"

"*It's okay for you and the kid to be fit and fabulous, but when I do it, it's over-compensation?*"

"*Mike. Darling. Dear. I'm all for self-improvement. But you used black market nanotech. People make the news for using this stuff, and it's never pretty. What if something goes wrong? What if there are side effects? Theo lost his eyesight taking New Eyes, or don't you remember?*"

"*How many plastic surgeries are botched each and every year? Yet people still get breast implants, facelifts, tummy tucks—*"

"*That's your defense? 'Everyone else is doing it, so I'm going to do it too?'*"

"*What do you want me to say?*"

"*That you don't feel the need to take pills to impress me or Theo or anyone else.*"

"*Drops.*"

"*What?*"

"*They're drops, not pills.*"

"*Are we really going to argue semantics right now?*"

## Exaggerating For Effect

**@theo**

There's more to the conversation, but I've heard all I care to at the moment, and so I back away from the door, recede into the kitchen. Setting down the stethoscope, I grab some yogurt and a granola bar, sit at the table. Munch slowly and thoughtlessly. Now I get why Dad was so mesmerized when I'd accidentally showed him my junk the other night: I'd crotch-shamed him. Because of it he's gone off the deep end and turned into a walking parody of himself.

Mini sprawls beside my yogurt cup. "So, your parents are on the verge of a meltdown, huh?"

I shovel a spoonful of yogurt into my mouth. "Do you really think it's a meltdown?"

"I was exaggerating for effect. You know your parents never fight. They have a *discourse*."

"Yeah, my parents never fight—that's why I'm so worried they're fighting now."

"Dude, relax. What's the worst that could happen—?"

Right then, Mom's studio door slides open. She goes straight upstairs, and OMFG, this hulking, rippling muscle monster follows after. It's got Dad's head, but the body is...well, remember Peter and/or David Paul in *The Barbarians*? This is a Chinese-Vietnamese version of that. He barely fits in his boxers, barely resembles my dad.

You can tell Mom's having none of it, the way she slams the bedroom door upstairs.

Dad pauses in the hallway, looking like he wants to follow her up. Instead, on spotting me, he bulges his way into the kitchen, joins me at the table. His ginormous pecs bounce perkily as he sits.

"So," he says.

"So," I say back.

"Do puppets dream of plush sheep?" He chuckles, gestures at Mini, now lying lifeless on the tabletop.

"He doesn't sleep."

"Ah."

"So."

"So."

"It looks like your, uh, drops worked."

Dad extends an arm, frowns at his abdomen. "Better than I expected."

"Mom seems upset."

"We're...going through a thing."

Aka, Mom can't understand why Dad thinks he needs a better bod; Dad can't understand why Mom thinks he should just be happy with what he has. Had.

"She's not a fan of the guns, apparently," Dad continues, and stands, starts to flex his arms so as to affect a dismissive pose, but somehow (I don't catch the exact action) his crotch bulge—or an over-enthusiastic thigh muscle—bumps into the stethoscope, sends it over the edge of the tabletop.

It clatters loudly against the floor.

And the two of us just look at each other unblinking until Dad at last clears his throat and, pretending the scope never existed, says, "It's fine. She just needs time to process. The Boho Mandate, rolling power-ons, spray bottles and social distancing and the economy in the toilet—we're all touchier than usual."

"I don't know, Dad," I say. "I think she would've reacted that way even if it weren't for all those things."

Dad glares at me. "Thanks, kiddo."

## We're All in This Together

**@eva**

"Dude Coolson's making another dosequisvirus announcement."

I look up at Theo. He's swiping incessantly on his phone. We're sitting across from each other at our usual socially-distanced lunchtime workbenches out in the middle of the Boca Linda football field. In case you haven't noticed, the Runt Squad has become a tribute band, with only two original members remaining. Ernie's still at home dealing with his hysterical pregnancy; Jan's presumably having lunch on his own, because I haven't seen or heard a peep from him since I got us both banned from Thrill-Kill's crypto-carnival the other night. Even Mini's MIA. Or simply lying dormant in some dark nook of Theo's messenger bag.

"Why are you doomscrolling?" I ask.

"I'm not doomscrolling." *Swipe, swipe...*

"Yeah, you are."

*Swipe, swipe, swipe...*

"You haven't even touched your veggie wrap."

"I'm not hungry."

"Loss of appetite, slouched posture, frownie-face—how are you *not* doomscrolling?" I get up, go over to Theo's workbench, yank the phone from his hand.

Surprisingly, he yanks it back.

Scowls at me.

Lowers his head again and taps the touchscreen, turns the volume up so that I'm now secondhand doomscrolling:

"*...effective as of midnight, I'm placing the city of San Angelico under a mandatory stay-at-home order. I'm also initiating the closure of all non-essential stores and services. Those remaining open will be limited to twenty-five-percent capacity. I'm also expanding the Boho Mandate to apply privately as well as publicly —especially for comely women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine.*

"*My fellow Angelicans. These have been trying times. We've scrimped and scraped and sacrificed. We've gone without power, without clothes. We've had to contend with spray bottles, sheen checks, social distancing, and so much uncertainty during a time of great social and economic upheaval. But there's light at the end of the tunnel. I stand before you a man humbled by the perseverance, the dedication of each and every resident of this great city of ours for remaining resolute in the face of adversity. Despite our most heroic efforts, though, dosequisvirus infections and rogue*

*ember counts are on the rise. Our efforts thus far have slowed the spread, but without aggressive monitoring and contact tracing, it won't be enough to stop it. That's why we need to cut off these rogue embers and nasty cooties at the source.*

"*With that in mind, the city has contracted with Sneekycam Systems to outfit every household in San Angelico with sophisticated sheen monitoring and contact tracing hardware and software. Sneekycam will be sending its first wave of specially-trained technicians to residential homes starting this weekend. Our goal is seventy-five-percent coverage by year's end. By this time next year, every last man, woman, and child will be monitored and protected by Sneekycam. Combined with normalized skimping, a strict boho regimen, spray bottles, social distancing, and continued rolling power-ons, I'm confident we can get this epidemic under control in mere years rather than decades.*

"*Stay indoors. Pay your bills. Maintain your sheen. Go boho, save lives. Do it. We're all in this together.*

"*Now, I'd like to turn things over to our esteemed fire commissioner, Nathaniel Faustman, with this week's numbers."*

"*Thank you, Mr. Coolson. Good afternoon, everyone. Please excuse my cloven hooves. They're the result of a childhood accident..."*

Now Theo's got me doomscrolling, too. I'm slowly and thoughtfully chewing suddenly-bland mouthfuls of chicken salad while *swipe-swiping* on my own phone. For the first time since the dosequisvirus epidemic hit I'm worried. Like, *really* worried. You see the daily stats for DOSVID-19 infections, the ember-related hospitalizations, and they're just numbers on a screen. Replayed footage of that same poor, unfortunate old woman lying on a gurney in a random ER while nurses set up an IV drip, douse her with their spray bottles. Other people in other parts of town dealing with other matters. But now it's hitting us where we live—literally. I mean, going boho in public, I guess in some distantly sane way that makes the slightest sense. But why would we have to skimp in the privacy of our own homes unless something's really, truly wrong? Are the germs that potent, the rogue embers that bad?

The Internet says yes.

"Huh," I murmur, stumbling across a press photo of Dude Coolson. "Mayor Coolson sort of looks like Will Arnett with a combover, doesn't he?"

Theo raises an eyebrow, *swipe-swipes* on his phone. "Huh. He sort of does."

"Funny."

"Yeah."

See what we did there? The two of us are too scared to admit it, and so we're simply poking fun at the mayor's douche bag demeanor. With all due respect to the real Will Arnett, of course. "Somehow having this guy as mayor doesn't fill me with confidence."

Theo squints at his phone. "The least he could've done was *not* deliver his speech from a golf course."

# From the Passenger Seat of My Mom's Leaf

**@theo**

I don't want to go home. Every other Boca Linda student waiting out here on the front lawn for their parents to pick them up is ecstatic about Mayor Coolson's stay-at-home order, but I'm dreading it. Not because it's too much of a beautiful, sunny southern California afternoon to be cooped up indoors, not because I might have chores when I get home, not because I'm concerned that the boho-at-home order means dosequisvirus and rogue embers are more prevalent than ever. No, I don't want to go home because being home means listening to Mom and Dad argue about Dad's Big Bod. And Big Dong. Skimping at school while in my default skin is awkward at best, but at least here I can easily distract myself with schoolwork. At home it's going to be nothing but my parents' muffled voices enticing me to eavesdrop. And even when they're not fighting, I'm going to be wondering, have they *been* fighting? *Will* they be fighting?

Mom's Leaf pulls up; she smiles and waves at me through the open window.

I heft my backpack, my spray bottle. I don't want to go home—

"*Bruh*, check out the smokin' hot fitness MILF!" shouts someone with a pronounced Mallomar Bay accent.

—yet I can't stay here.

Climbing into the passenger seat, I yank the door shut, buckle my seatbelt, perspire quietly as we cruise down the street.

"How was your day?" Mom asks.

"The usual," I reply with a shrug.

"I guess you've heard the news about the mayor's stay-at-home order?"

"Yeah."

"Will it affect your Web design clients?"

Huh. I hadn't thought of that yet. "I already do everything online. I should be fine." I also hadn't thought about Mom's homeopathy business, Dad's office job. "What about you and Dad, though?"

It takes a sec for Mom to give me an answer—though it's to the wrong question: "The two of us are spending some time apart."

I choke back the lump that's just formed in my throat. "You mean, like, a divorce?"

"No, no. More like...a reevaluation."

"But what about the stay-at-home order? Isn't everyone supposed to, you know, stay home?"

"That doesn't start until midnight. We took care of things this morning."

"So...he's just going to live in a hotel or something?"

"He'll be staying with Grandma Hong for a while."

This is ridiculous. I want to tell Mom it's ridiculous, I want to pull out my phone and text Dad that it's ridiculous, insist that no dad in his right mind would separate from his wife because his kid's crotchfire has caused him to doubt his own manhood. But all I can do is sit perfectly still and stare at my flip-flopped feet while replaying the night of the Talk in my head. If only my stupid towel hadn't fallen off. If only I hadn't flashed my dad.

If only.

## Sneeky Upgrade

**@ernie**

Did you watch the news? Mayor Coolson is telling us we have to wear our bikinis and bath towels at home now. Just great. What's next? Mandatory enemas? I don't even care anymore. Thanks to *El Cassetto*, my regular clothes no longer fit, and so I've been towel-ridden anyway. It's the principal of the thing, though. The being *told* I have to stay *boho*. My knee-jerk reaction is to immediately get dressed, but as I said, I don't even care anymore.

It sounds like someone's knocking on the front door. Gramps answers, talks briefly to the someone. That someone clambers loudly down the hallway and into the bathroom. I don't really *care*, but I guess it's not altogether unwarranted to go see who it is. Cuz. I open the bedroom door, poke my head out into the hallway.

Gramps is standing there with his arms folded, and is watching some technician-looking dude through the open bathroom door. "How are you feeling, kiddo?" Gramps asks.

"Like I'm nine months pregnant," I reply.

"Should I call the school again for your homework?"

I shrug. Poor bastard thinks I have dosequisvirus. "We're doing online classes now, Gramps."

He nods, ruffles my hair.

"What's he doing here?" I jerk my thumb in the direction of the bathroom.

"Oh, he's a technician from the city. He's installing our new Sneekycam system. Nasty business with these DOSVID-19 embers. Flaming viruses! Who'd've thunk?"

What, are we playing the telephone game now? "Gramps, rogue embers and the dosequisvirus, they're two different things."

But Gramps just chuckles and heads back to the living room.

Moving into the bathroom doorway, I observe the Sneekycam fatty, his enormous butt crack smiling at me from above the waist of his Speedo-utility belt combo. See, that's why I chose to go with the bath towel instead of shorts or trunks. Fit people look good in swimwear. Fat fries such as myself and the Sneekycam guy, we're only passable in towels or robes.

I lean against the door frame and ask, "How's a rogue ember supposed to get in here? And even then, this is a bathroom. It's water and tile. It's literally the least-flammable part of the house."

The Sneekycam guy shrugs. "You'd be surprised. I have a cousin whose cologne

caught fire while he was prepping for a date. Ended up in the ER."

Why do people always do that? I could mention unicorns being fake, and I bet someone somewhere would have a rebuttal starting with, "I have a cousin who..." Followed by the most flimsy story involving a unicorn. Don't believe me? Go ask a friend or family member something ridiculous. I guarantee they'll have a completely baseless response as to why it's not so ridiculous. Now, I'm not saying dosequisvirus isn't real or that rogue embers don't exist—but you have to admit the way society is handling them, unicorns can't be far behind.

Once the Sneekycam guy's finished and out of the house, I go into the bathroom and check out the "improvements" he's installed. It's really just the shower that's been upgraded. Instead of hot and cold taps, it's all touchscreen. The shower head looks sleek and fancy, kind of like a giant schlong, if you ask me. I wouldn't put it past the city to have repurposed used sex toys just to save a few bucks.

I hole myself up in my room again after making a pitstop in the kitchen for some much-needed snacks. Being home from school is both a blessing and a curse. Yeah, I may be able to lie around my bedroom all day, but it also means I'm alone with my thoughts, and being alone with your thoughts is always lame. Honestly, I've given up on the whole *El Cassetto* thing. Part of me has been considering, what if it *is* a hoax? What if it *is* all in my head? Pattern recognition or whatever the hell Theo had said that day we made the bet?

No. Screw that.

Screw *him*.

Yes, I fully realize I'm blaming him for the larger picture, which is that life isn't all neat and episodic like in the movies. Leads go nowhere; plots fizzle out; endings never come. Time just goes on, you know? Doesn't mean I'm automatically cool with my best friend stating the obvious.

*El Cassetto* is totally real, and I'm living proof. But *finding* the damned tape, *proving* it's not just a meme gone wild like they're saying on the news, that's a whole other deal. The Internet's huge, the world even bigger. How do you find a needle in a haystack? *Turner & Hooch* at the bottom of a discount DVD bin? I was doomed from the start. Sprite was merely the final nail in the coffin that interred my search for truth. He's what I must look like to the rest of the Runt Squad: lost, hopeless, bat shiz crazy. Oh, the bet's off, isn't it? I'm through. Like when Mulder finally gave up trying to get everyone else to believe him. He knew the truth and that it was out there, but he also knew it was pointless convincing others. And so Scully became the believer, and Mulder the non-believer, and...I forget where I'm going with this. I know what's happened to me, I know it's not just me jumping on some social media bandwagon, and I know no one will ever listen to me. This is literally my weight to bear, and mine alone.

## The Darkmaster Cometh

**@ernie**

I need to clear my head, do something meaningful. That means it's game time. Real life may be a total clusterfunk, but in *Hella War*, I can make the gains. I swivel around in my chair, fire up my PC, settle into a groove working my way through a Rotten Cabbage Patch campaign. It's mindless amateur hack-and-slash, but still good for leveling up.

**Darkmaster:** yo evil
**Darkmaster:** lets do this

Dorkmeister! Well, it's about friggin' time!

**Darkmaster:** just sent you an invite
**Darkmaster:** no bs this time i promise
**Darkmaster:** ready evil?

My instinct is to switch over to bloodhound mode. But I hesitate, instead staring at Darkmaster's ridiculous dungeon master avatar. I wonder if he isn't too much of a douche supreme to mastermind something as diabolical as *El Cassetto*. Like, I've been waiting to catch him for so long, I kind of stopped giving a damn after a while, kind of figured I'd never talk to him again after the Hellpocalypse debacle. Now that I've got him on the line, it's a little...anticlimactic.

Scrolling back through our chat history, I find the text that got me all hot and bothered in the first place:

**Darkmaster:** dude I don't play mixtapes, I MAKE them.

This after boasting about his supposedly prolific boning abilities applied to various unsuspecting women across the vast Interwebs of the world. It certainly sounds like an *El Cassetto* sort of sentiment. But does that mean Darkmaster's actually behind it? I should probably be sure. I go back to his avatar—wait a sec. There are wrestling trophies cluttering the top of his dresser. I never noticed those before. Nor the Boca Linda Smoochers hot lips mascot poster plastered on the wall. This guy goes to my school, is on the wrestling team, and—

**evil_ernie:** hey are you on supermeganet?
**Darkmaster:** isn't everyone?
**evil_ernie:** add me to your buddy list
**Darkmaster:** no offense bruh but I dont add people I don't know
**evil_ernie:** oh you'll want to add me, my dear Darkmaster
**evil_ernie:** aka mark howard
**evil_ernie:** mark howard who goes to boca linda high school, is on the wrestling team, and whose true identity i now prossess

A pause.

Then a SuperMegaNet notification informing me that Darkmaster's added me to his buddy list.

**Darkmaster:** we should talk

## Darkmaster Unmasked

**@ernie**

I check my bath towel and swipe into Darkmaster's bedroom. There's the wrestling bling. There's the Boca Linda Smoochers hot lips mascot poster. There but for the grace of God sits the good Dorkmeister himself, helmeted, loinclothed, rocking an admittedly bad-ass, skull-encrusted gaming throne. He looks every bit as heavy metal as in his avatar, and I hate him for it.

"You," he murmurs accusingly.

"Me," I reply.

"Jesus. Small world."

"The smallest."

"You're friends with Eva and Jan and that Theo kid. The Runt Squad, right?"

"I didn't realize we were a household name."

"Eva mentioned you during wrestling practice."

"What, are you two dating now?"

"Why would we be?"

Why indeed, my dear Darkmaster? "I read the *Daily Angel*. I know all about you jock types and what goes on during *practice* at those little *training* camps you attend, groping each other's taught, toned bodies on a sweaty mat while creepy coach calls the shots."

"Dude," says Darkmaster, no doubt cringing inside that stupid dungeon master helmet of his, "I don't know what you think wrestling's all about, but it's not that. At all. Ever."

"Right." Of course. Mm-hm. I continue to stare him down.

He continues to stare back. "Well."

"*Well.*"

"Myron Deathkill."

"*Darkmaster.*"

He performs a sigh specifically designed to showcase his top-heavy physique. "So. You know my alter-ego."

I nod. "Let's make it official. Take off that ridiculous helmet."

"Why? You already know who I am."

"This is an unmasking! It's the principle of the thing!"

Darkmaster folds his arms, flexes his pecs menacingly.

"I *will* unmask you," I warn.

"I'd like to see you try."

Considering that I'm still recovering from crotchfire-induced PTSD, it's probably not a good idea to be picking fights—especially with someone on the wrestling team who *should* know how to react when opposing meat throws itself at him. But he doesn't, and I do. The two of us collide in a tangle of flailing arms and bloodlust atop his skull throne. He may have an arsenal of muscle at his command, but I've got fat. Soft fat. The kind of fat that's hard to grab onto unless you really, really know what you're doing—and Darkmaster doesn't know what he's doing. He's never been more than ten-percent body fat in his entire life. He can't handle it. While he's busy just trying to get a hold of me, I'm busy grabbing his helmet, yanking it from his head—

"*Get off me, you little oinker!"* he shouts, and shoves me back hard with one arm while using his other to hastily hit the escape key on his keyboard.

Stumbling backward with the helmet gripped tightly in my hands, I notice the live-streaming app running on Darkmaster's computer. "You're live-streaming?"

"I *was*." Darkmaster—now demoted appropriately to plain ol' pec-fest Mark Howard—swivels his throne around, quickly shuts down his streaming app. Then he swivels to face me again. "There. You've embarrassed me in front of my subscribers. Are you happy?"

I want to reply with a snappy comeback, but he really looks upset. Like, verge-of-tears upset. It catches me off guard. This definitely isn't the kind of reaction I'd expect from a guy into deflowering the Internet via a homemade mixtape meme.

"Sorry, geez," I say, and hand him back his helmet.

He takes it, props it in his lap. "Is this about my ditching you in the *Hella War*?"

*Jackal!* "It...um, no. I only use my throwaway account whenever I collab." Totally untrue.

"What, then?"

"Well, I just...I thought you were, um...uploading into hapless online poontang. You're not...are you?"

Mark's pecs deflate slightly. "*What?*"

"You know, all that stuff you said about being an incubus, a professional *inseminator*? Making mixtapes instead of playing them?"

"When did I say that?"

"In the *Hella War* chat."

"Dude, *that?* That was just BS. Gamer talk."

"So...you're not the evil mastermind behind *El Cassetto*?"

Mark looks incredulous. "You mean that racist meme about a perverted mixtape going around knocking chicks up?"

I'm beginning to feel the slightest bit foolish. "Um...yeah?"

"Do *you* think I'm behind it?"

"Are you?"

"Yeah, evil, I made a cassette tape that goes around knocking girls up on my behalf."

I narrow my eyes. "You're being sarcastic, aren't you?"

“Of course I’m being sarcastic!”
“Positive?”
“Positive.”
“Super cereal?”
“Evil, what do you want from me?”
“The truth!”

## Naker

**@ernie**

Mark shushes me with a wave of his hand. "Fine, okay—just keep your voice down. My parents are in the next room." He slouches his shoulders, leans back in his throne. "The truth is, I'm a Naker."

"What?"

"I mine Newdcoin by live-streaming naked and doing, uh, solo cam vids."

"You can't do porn!" I exclaim. "You're a high-schooler!"

"*Shh!*"

Woops. "Sorry."

"I'm eighteen."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I got held back a year."

I frown. "Let me get this straight. You're an eighteen-year-old high school cam wanker still living at home with his parents?"

"What's wrong with being eighteen and still living at home?"

"Asks the musclebound ignoramus trying to launch a porn career out of his mommy's and daddy's house!"

"Listen, evil. I don't expect you to get any of this—you're just a little kid who happened to be promoted to the ninth grade early—but take a look around you. Thanks to dosequisvirus, all the jobs are gone. We're not allowed to work, yet our bills are still due. I can't get hired to save my life, and it's only going to get worse now that the city's on lockdown. If I'm supposed to be skimping at home anyway, why shouldn't I go the rest of the way, earn some decent coin naking in front of strangers on the Internet? What would *you* do in my place..." He frowns at my torso. "...if you were five years older and a hundred pounds lighter?"

"I wouldn't show off my junk online!" I shout—even though you and I both know I'd *totally* wank myself dry for cash if I had half the body Mark does.

"What did I say about the yelling?"

"Sorry." Again.

Mark frowns. "What happened to your eyes, by the way?"

"Post-traumatic spunk disorder," I reply. "Don't worry about it."

"Um...okay."

—

*(This awkward pause is brought to you*
*by Milda's of Portland—get your nake on!)*

—

Mark continues: "So...there you go. The truth. Now that you know my secret, think you can keep cool about it and not tell anyone?"

An evil grin commandeers the entire lower half of my face; the afternoon light shifts impossibly to light me from below. "Oh, I won't tell *any*one, I'm telling *every*one!"

"Seriously. My mom thinks I have a part-time job. Well, this *is* a part-time job, but she thinks I have a more...*acceptable* one. If she finds out, she'd just die. First her husband's real estate photography business goes bust, then her only son winds up doing cam vids to help keep the lights on?"

"Hey, that's your own damned fault, steel tits."

"Come on. I might run for president some day."

"You? President? Ha!" I lower my voice to a condescending drone. "You will *never* be president, Darkmaster. Never."

Mark scowls, tries to stare me down. But I can see it in his eyes: he's scared, terrified of what I'm going to do to him, his reputation, his family, his deathboard ranking, and...crap. I can't do it. I can't rat him out. I don't know what's wrong with me, but suddenly I'm sure that I can't simply blab to the world what I've discovered here today. It would be too much of a jerk move. Yes, even for *moi*.

"Your secret's safe with me," I say after a moment, the light returning to normal. "But only on one condition."

Looking cautiously relieved, Mark asks, "What's that?"

"You have to forfeit your *Hella War* campaign."

"Are you freaking *kidding* me?"

"*Shh!*" I put my finger to my lips mockingly. "Your parents are in the next room."

"I worked my butt off to get to Flaming Nightmare!"

"Okay, a budding adult star should never use the phrase 'worked my butt off.'"

Mark stands up, folds his arms, faces me down. "You ever think that maybe the problem with the world is that once a person turns eighteen, we stop giving a damn? Everything bad that happens to you as an adult you deserve because you should've known better, you're on your own, oh well, too bad? Maybe if we cared about each other as adults the way we care about our kids, the world would be a better place. You ever think of any of that?"

I *have* thought about it. Nevertheless, I stand my ground. "My silence in exchange for your giving up Flaming Nightmare. Take it or leave it, gorgeous."

After several dirty looks and a faltering expletive DOA at the back of his throat, Mark sits at his computer. He logs into *Hella War*. Brings up his campaign options. Highlights Flaming Nightmare. Hits delete.

I pat him on the shoulder. "A pleasure doing business with you. I'll be on my

way now, if you please."

Without a word, he alt-tabs to his SuperMegaNet window and sends me home.

Back in my bedroom, I stand motionless beside my desk and think to myself. Hard. I've scored a mini-victory. I should be happy. Instead, I feel like Dennis the Menace when he met Bart Simpson, and it was so obvious who was superior. No, I feel like Bart Simpson when he met Eric Cartman in that episode of *South Park*. Bart was *so* lame. America's bad-boy? Hardly! Stole the head off a statue? Cartman fed Scott Tenorman's parents to him as *chili*. I got Dorkmeister to nuke his *Hella War* campaign? Cartman probably would've made him drink a tea brewed from his own tinkle. I'm no Eric Cartman, no Bart Simpson, and I'm certainly no Dennis the Menace. I'm just the token fat kid trying to eat his way out of a jock-infested, social media-fueled suburb somewhere in a crap corner of southern California. If you ask me, Darkmaster got off easy today.

He totally could've gotten an Eric Cartman to my Bart Simpson.

# Son of Distant Earth

**@mini**

I'm merely a plush representation of Theo's spunk. I was never born, never had any parents to speak of, and I certainly never lost one or both of them due PTSD (post-traumatic spunk disorder). So, I can't say that I understand what Theo's going through at the moment. I *do* know it's serious enough that, just between you and me, he hasn't thought a single sexy thought since Mom picked us up from school yesterday afternoon. Now it's lunchtime power hour on an otherwise sunny Saturday afternoon, and now when he should be lazing about lovingly grasping his nether regions while concentrating on a mental pic of his current manga babe of the week, he's instead sitting straight-backed at his desk and is writing something on his laptop.

"When did you change your username?" I ask, perched on his shoulder. I wave my mitt at the top-right of the screen, where the venerable "l33t_master" has been replaced with, "Son of Distant Earth."

"This morning," Theo replies.

"Any particular reason why?"

"It's a play on the title of Mike Oldfield's 1994 album, *The Songs of Distant Earth*, which is itself a homage to the 1986 Arthur C. Clarke novel of the same name."

"Thanks for the long-winded, ultimately uninformative politician answer, but let's try again. *Why the change?*"

Theo frowns at me. "Why the questions?"

"I asked you first."

"You're supposed to be my spunk, right? Figure it out."

"Hey, analytics and problem-solving is your thing. I'm mostly good for when you need to seduce someone or kill something. Both simultaneously, if necessary."

"Well, try again."

"Ooh, twenty questions?"

"Mini—"

"I *love* twenty questions—"

Theo immediately interrupts my social engineering: "If you must know, since Asia downloaded last week, I've been swamped with friend requests. People on the streets calling me #luckylittledude and #HeavyWiener and thinking I hang out in Asia's bedroom all day. I need to lay low."

I can't help smiling. "Something's different about you, and it's not just that

you're skimping indoors now, thank you extended Boho Mandate. This is something else. A touch of...dare I say it...aggression? Angst?"

"Whatever." Theo returns his attention to his computer.

"See? The way you rolled your eyes, the way you're tensing your forearms needlessly while you type, the melancholy face, that aggressive posture...O. M. F. G. You're adolescent, bruh. You're transitioning from soft rock to hard rock, and maybe even heavy metal beyond. You're becoming a brooding, brawny, sexy teenage beast—"

Grabbing me by the head, Theo tosses me onto the floor. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"*So* sexy, bruh!" I coo on the way down.

## Who Reviews the Reviewers?

**@mini**

I climb back onto Theo's shoulder, study his laptop screen, this time focusing on content over chrome. He's got LibreOffice open. The document he's working on? It's called, "Three Things EVERY Laptop Reviewer Gets Wrong." Here's the current draft:

> Dear sh*tty YouTube tech reviewers: stop spreading your ignorant, misinformed, uneducated propaganda when reviewing the latest laptops. Yes, form is important, but functionality is *more* important. When you praise the former over the latter, you only serve to perpetuate an erroneous demand for sub-optimal computing experiences. You also demonstrate a considerable lack of *kung fu* in the process.
>
> Here are three things you're getting absolutely wrong about laptops:
>
> • **Thinner and/or no bezels are always better.** I don't need to be fingerprinting my screen every time I open or close my laptop. The bezel serves a very important function by facilitating physical handling. To handle your plate at a buffet, you leave room at the edge, right? Leaving space at the edge of your screen is also a no-brainer.
>
> • **High-DPI is unnecessary.** Why is it you won't even *touch* a phone without a crisp, high-res screen, but on your laptop "good enough" is good enough? You wouldn't put up with a paperback copy of *Ready Player One* printed at 72 DPI, so why are you okay with fuzzy text on a laptop screen? Seems hypocritical to me.
>
> • **Touchscreens are mandatory.** On phones and tablets, input is done on a horizontal surface—ie, the touchscreen. This makes sense. On a laptop, input is done on a horizontal surface: the keyboard. However, adding a second, vertical input surface—ie, a touchscreen—is fundamentally counterproductive 1) because it unnecessarily encourages input between two separate surfaces, and 2) because it only targets your anterior deltoids.
>
> Criticize all you want—just do your homework and know *why* you're

criticizing. Otherwise, your sauce is weak, your snark misplaced.

"So..." I murmur thoughtfully, "...you're reviewing other people's reviews?"

Theo shrugs. "It's about time somebody did."

"You *do* realize that's the kind of sentiment superheroes throw around while picking out a costume before their first night on the town."

"Well...maybe the tech review world needs a superhero."

"Someone like Son of Distant Earth?"

I catch Theo blushing as he looks away. "I'm tired of letting things happen. The world dictates and judges and expects and condemns, and you're supposed to just put up with it day after day. You let things happen because you think that's all you can do. You talk about it with your friends, how this is lame, or that's bad, or that's not supposed to be, but nobody actually does anything about any of it. And so things get lame, they get bad, they become what's not supposed to be. I want...I want to start *making* instead of just *letting*."

"What, like you want to join a protest group or something?" I ask. "Cancel an unwoke celebrity? Create an NFT of one of your farts?"

Theo glares at me.

"Okay, how about this. Your parents have separated, and now you need to compensate for a situation you can't control by creating one you *can* control. In other words, you can't yell and shout at your parents to stop being stupid about their arguments, so you go online and yell at the Internet instead. That's why anyone anywhere posts anything online in the first place, by the way. Messy breakup, fired from work, rent increase, GimmeGimme order lost in the mail—something in your life is going to hell, and the world needs to know about it, even if it's via passive-aggressive tech reviewer reviews."

Theo stares at his laptop keyboard. "Wow. I guess that's kind of true." He cracks a small smile. "But I also really, really hate ignorant laptop reviewers."

I look at the LibreOffice document again. "You're not wrong. I mean, why *do* we care that our phones have the crispest screens possible while our laptops are stuck at barely more than two megapixels?"

"Right?"

We chuckle together.

Theo seems to relax a bit. He saves "Three Things EVERY Laptop Reviewer Gets Wrong," opens up a new blank document.

"What are you writing now?" I ask.

"A rant on people who mispronounce Apple *Silikan*."

## Megalomoto Rising

**@theo**

I guess I feel a little better after talking with Mini—kind of like how visits with Dr. Freud used to be before he became obsessed with my (nonexistent) sex life. I'd never thought about it, but I *do* want control over my various situations. My life's been on autopilot; things have been *happening*, and I'm supposed to just take it and hang on for dear life. Well, from now on—

A knock at my door.

"Come in!" I call out.

"*It's me!"* Mom calls back.

"I know!"

"*I'm going to come into your room now!"*

"Okay!"

"*Unless you're doing something private, in which case I can wait until you're finished!"*

Mini smirks. "She thinks you're masturbating, dude."

"*Come in, Mom!"*

Mom carefully opens the door, pokes her head into my room. Looks relieved to find me still in my shorts. "How're you holding up?"

"Fine."

"Lunch is ready, if you're hungry."

"Okay." I close my laptop and leave my desk, following Mom down into the kitchen. She hands me three place mats and tells me to set the table, and for a split second I'm thinking that Dad's back, he's made up with Mom, we're one big happy family again—

—then Mr. Megalomoto walks into the room. Fresh from the downstairs bathroom and beaming ear to ear. To satisfy the Boho Mandate, he's swapped out his usual suit and slightly-loosened tie for some kind of skimpy *rokushaku* clearly designed to show off the goods—or, in Megalomoto's case, the not-so-goods. He's also wearing a cheesy bow-tie. He's in okay shape for a guy his age. But bare skin definitely isn't one of his strengths. He looks like a sumo wrestler and a Chippendales dancer spliced their DNA in the back of a ramen shop.

"Young Master Ivanovich!" Megalomoto barks, ruffling my hair, clasping my shoulder. "I must say, the Mandate suits you and Anya quite well indeed!"

(Yeah, he barks everything, by the way, each word out of his mouth as grandiose as the last.)

I monotone him: "Hello, Mr. Megalomoto."

Oblivious, he lets me go, takes a seat at the table, watches Mom a little too closely as she brings the food over.

I set out the place mats, one for me, one for Mom, and, finally, slowly, hesitantly, one for Megalomoto. I sit. Mom serves me salad, tofu, garlic rice noodles. One mouthful in, I put down my fork and stare fixedly at my plate. No offense, but without Dad's cooking, the food's mediocre at best. So's the company. I don't know. Maybe it's a latent Oedipal thing, but I did *not* like Mr. Megalomoto hitting on my mom when she was still together with Dad. I definitely don't like it now. And he *is* hitting on her.

"Nasty business, this whole stay-at-home thing!" Megalomoto proclaims. "You work from home, yes, Theo?"

See how he was talking to me and yet smiling at Mom the whole time? See how she's smiling *back?* "Yeah."

"Ah, but I suppose you've got a bit of an advantage working online! Your clients are only a text or e-mail away, eh?"

Another morsel of food finds its way into my mouth.

"That's the way to do it! Light and lean and able to telecommute from anywhere—Anya, my dear, behold the future of freelancers!" Megalomoto reaches for my shoulder again—

I shrug out of my chair. "Have-to-go-to-the-bathroom-be-right-back." I hurry out of the kitchen, across the hall, through Mom's studio. Of course, I don't *really* have to go to the bathroom; I just need a moment's alone time. I lock myself inside, sitting on the toilet and holding my head in my hands.

My shorts ruffle; Mini pops out and onto the floor. "He didn't even wait a week before moving in on your dad's territory! I know he does studio sessions with your mom, but no one's *that* friendly unless they want the girl to be friendly back."

"You think?" I ask.

"I *know*." Mini pats my ankle gravely. "Dude—"

"Don't say it—"

"—Mr. Megalomoto is applying for the position of Replacement Dad."

## Cognitive Bathroom Therapy

**@theo**

I sit up straight on the bowl, run my hands through my hair. As upset as I am, it's hard to stay that way in Mom's bathroom, what with all the lavender and lemongrass, bamboo and bonsai. It reminds me of my bedroom and, geez, how much I take after her—with the exception of her apparent affinity for Mr. Megalomoto. "Is it at all possible that he's just being, uh, available in a time of need?"

Mini shrugs. "If you have to ask..."

"But it takes two to make a thing work. Mom doesn't have to say yes."

"She doesn't have to say *no*, either."

"Oh, God." I swallow hard. "What if Mr. Megalomoto *does* become my new dad?"

"Would that be so bad?"

I glare at Mini.

"Hey, just a little CBT," he says. "Worst-case scenario, your mom hooks up with the Mister and nine months from now you've got a little baby brother or sister. Again, would that be so bad?"

"It'd be awful!"

"Why?"

"Because Mr. Megalomoto's creepy! Because *Dad's* my dad. Because...it's my fault he saw my crotch and decided to flip out. Because...Megalomoto's *not* my dad. Not now, not ever."

"But *again*, if he were—"

"Never!"

"Let's weigh the pros and cons, then. Pro, he's got the money bags. And the confidence. Women like that kind of stuff. Your mom would be happy."

"Con, I'd be miserable."

"Pro, play your cards right, and you'll get a fancy BMW when you turn sixteen."

"Con, no more of Dad's cooking."

"Pro, as horny as Megalomoto's been for your mom for so long, you *know* he's going to be hitting it with her day and night for at least the first six months of marriage."

My jaw drops. "How's that a pro?"

"It means you'll be living the bachelor life early. Unsupervised—*free*. The

adults will be so busy with each other that you'll be able to come and go as you please, all day, everyday." Mini looks thoughtful. "Hm. Unless Megalomoto sends you to some all-boys academy because he's got a weird thing about macking while there's a kid in the next room."

"Dude, *gross*."

"Just saying."

"Con...why can't my family just...stay together?" I hold my head in my hands again and start sobbing. Like, I'm *really* crying, sniffles, tears, heaving shoulders and all. I'm not sure exactly why. I only know I've been needing to let this out since yesterday. I also know that when I'm done, I actually feel a lot better. I'm still bummed out, but the burn is gone, the weight's eased up. I can breathe again. I even feel a little silly. Some kids lose their parents to war, cancer, a Wal-Mart stampede or plane crash, and here I am bawling because mine are spending some time apart. Let's be clear: I do *not* like the situation. But maybe there's worse stuff going on in the world. Maybe I can get through this.

I grab a hand towel and dry the tears from my face and chest. Then I pick up Mini and exit the bathroom, return to the kitchen, seat myself at the table.

Both Mom and Mr. Megalomoto are looking at me funny.

Because *duh*, I'm now holding a plush doll I didn't have when I'd left.

## The Hundred-Dollar Bill

**@theo**

Perplexed expressions abound as I slide Mini under the table, wedging him against my thigh.

"Is everything okay, sweetie?" Mom asks.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Should I set another place at the table?"

"Huh?"

"For your little friend." Mom smirks and gestures below the tabletop.

"Oh." She's joking, of course. Letting me know that she knows I play with dolls. I give her a shrug, and suddenly dig into my noodles with a bit too much gusto. Between mouthfuls: "GimmeGimme had a sale on plush a while back. Picked it up for half off."

Mini pinches me.

"*Ow!*" I yell, and drop my fork, clamp my hands over my mouth while simultaneously leaning to one side as subtly as possible so as to secure Mini firmly beneath my right butt cheek.

Again, looks of utter bewilderment from the adults.

I resume eating. This time Mini behaves. "Mr. Megalomoto?"

Faking indifference, Megalomoto clears his throat. "Yes, my boy?"

"What was that you were saying earlier about the bond market?"

"Ah. Why, yes. I was just explaining to your lovely mother here that with interest rates poised to go up, moving a portion of her portfolio into high-quality bonds would be a prudent means of offsetting lackluster stock performance…"

And off he goes, rambling endlessly about investing, business, nothing at all. I'm perfectly content to let him hog the spotlight—but the feeling's short-lived, because when we finish lunch and are hand-washing the dishes together (power hour's up, so no dishwasher), I catch Megalomoto leaning in and whispering loudly into Mom's ear, "Never you worry about how the home business will fare during the dosequisvirus lockdown. I'll be taking *real* good care of you and Master Ivanovich here."

I nearly drop the plate I'm holding. I can't tell if it's Mom hugging Megalomoto or Megalomoto hugging Mom; I just know they're hugging, and I want to scream and jump up and down and demand an explanation—

"I'm going to show Mr. Megalomoto out," Mom says. "Can you take care of the drying?"

"Yeah, Mom."

Megalomoto walks over to me. "Take care, my boy!" He ruffles my hair, palpitates my shoulder, then follows Mom out of the kitchen.

I glance at the table.

Someone's left a folded hundred-dollar bill between the salt and pepper.

*Megalomoto.*

Something clicks inside me. Like, I'm about to overload, and so a circuit's tripped, a hidden switch thrown. Were it not for this failsafe mechanism, I might be inclined to rip off my shorts and go feral, grunting and screaming and hurling wads of my own poo. Instead, I simply retreat to my bedroom, where I sit calmly at my desk with my hands folded neatly in my lap.

"Wow," Mini says, appearing on my leg. "You handled that better than I expected. You okay?"

I nod.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shake my head.

"Should I make up some story about us catching Mr. Megalomoto ruffling through your mom's bikini drawer?"

I shrug.

"What, then?"

Clearing my throat, I fix Mini with a steady, solemn gaze and murmur, "I'm going to become a Shakaist."

# Shakaish

**@theo**

Huh. According to my SuperMegaNet buddy list, "Shaka Brah" is now "shakabrah."

**son_of_distant_earth:** You changed your screen name.
**shakabrah:** And you yours.
**son_of_distant_earth:** Yeah.
**son_of_distant_earth:** Can we talk?
**shakabrah:** Sure.

A video chat window pops up framing shakabrah head and shoulders against the usual backdrop of his van's organic interior. "New skin?" he asks.

Duh, that's right: he knows me as an undead monkey-boy, and not as ordinary, everyday me. I've forgotten to switch over to Puck Martin. "Oh. This is, uh...a new skin I've been playing around with."

"Kind of a Goten motif going on."

*Why does everyone say that?* "How come you changed your screen name?"

"Boring legal wrinkle I ran into while incorporating last week. How about you?"

"Boring personal wrinkle."

"What's on your mind, monkey-boy?" shakabrah asks, laughing.

I take a deep breath, shift in my seat. "Does it work?"

"Does what work?"

"Being a Shakaist. Does it work?"

"It works," shakabrah replies. "But I guess what you're really asking is, will it work for *you?*"

I nod.

"To answer your question with another question, why do you want to know if it works?"

"I'm thinking of maybe sort of becoming a Shakaist."

"That's awesome. I'm partial to the subculture myself." shakabrah winks. "But again, why?"

I want to blame it on Mr. Megalomoto and my mom. Really, though, it's several things that have snowballed in recent times. "Dosequisvirus, the Boho Mandate here in San Angelico, rogue embers, sheen checks, lockdowns, contact

tracing…" My parents splitting up. "…I just want things to be simple again."

shakabrah shakes his head. "The world will never be simple, but you can live simply."

"That's what I want," I say, "to live simply like you do, to have what you have."

"What do I have?"

"You know, a safe little haven. A domain of your own. The world is this crazy, out-of-control place, but there, in your van, you're untouchable. I wish…I wish I had your life."

"So, you want to live out of the back of a van?"

Hm.

"Hiding from your family behind a boho boy skin?"

Hmm.

"*Having* to travel the open road instead of merely *wanting* to?"

*Hmm.*

"Put it this way." shakabrah cracks a smile. "If ever someone comes to me saying they want my life, I ask, do they want my life specifically, or do they just want to live a life *like* mine? Does that make sense?"

Why do I feel like I'm taking a test that I didn't study for? "I guess I want to find peace and balance, like you."

"Shakaism isn't about *finding* anything. It's about tapping into the everything you've always wanted and already have. *Your* life, *your* jungle island paradise already with you no matter where you go. As luck would have it, you're already dressed boho. For everything else, I'll send you a link to the official YouTube tutorial. The gist of it is, live simply, live cleanly. Eat healthy and exercise regularly. Lay off the drugs and alcohol. Use tech sparingly. Keep lean and light in all respects. More importantly, *want* to do these things. *Most* importantly, realize and accept that it's not doing these things that makes you happy, it's being happy doing them. Oh, and monkey-boy?"

"Yeah?"

"Welcome aboard."

I close the video chat, click shakabrah's YouTube link as soon as he sends it. He really does have a knack for gentle persuasion, and I wonder how much of it is him, and how much is his skin. Like, if Ernie were hosting the same video, would I be just as interested, or would I dismiss him and his cause after the first fifteen seconds? When the video's done, I sit back and ponder the Boho Mandate. I think I enjoy the boho lifestyle, but I don't enjoy showing off my body. It's a paradox, I know. I could go persistent as Puck Martin, but the older I get, the younger Cameron Beaumont seems by comparison. I don't want to be sixteen and deepfaking a preteen. Heck, I don't want to be *thirteen* and deepfaking a preteen. If I'm going to do this, I've got to do it in my default skin. Also, kids my age aren't supposed to enjoy the simple things in life. We're supposed to be into fashion, phones, haircuts, money. Those are my hurdles: be comfortable in my own skin, do so regardless of what my peers think.

There's this odd counterpoint of nervousness and relaxation hovering over me,

the worry that at any moment the Boho Mandate will end, and I'll still be skimping voluntarily—but I also don't care. The skimping and the worry are two separate things.

Disconnected.

Free from each other.

My parents' separation and my worry—free from each other.

Dosequisvirus and my worry—free.

Is that a tear in my eye?

Are those endorphins coursing through my veins?

*Whoa.*

This is me.

*Making* something happen instead of *letting* it happen.

Summoning my inner jungle island.

Becoming a Shakaist.

*Rawr.*

# Of the Farting and Frothing

**@ernie**

So, it's about a week into lockdown, and I've finally gotten my very first cell phone ever. I know what you're thinking: what thirteen-year-old doesn't have his own phone in this day and age? Well, before today, it was me and the kids from *Stand By Me*. And it slurped butthole. All my friends have had phones; dirt-cheap *Janny Boy* has one. Friggin' homeless people living on bus stop benches have phones. Now (finally!) so do I, and all it took was an epidemic and a lockdown to convince my crusty ol' grandparents that I need some kind of lifeline to the outside world—if only to keep up with my homework assignments.

This morning, Gramps braved the DOSVID-riddled, ember-infested outdoors and returned with a shopping bag from Lindy Mobile, where he'd enrolled the Womack household in their New Deal Family Plan. The darned thing may be metallic pea and have wood paneling so as to appeal to the geriatrics of yesteryear, and it's only 3G, but it's a phone, goddamnit, and I'm holding it in my hot little hands, and it's *mine*.

Naturally, the first thing I do is use my PC to download myself and my new phone into Theo's bedroom. "Hey, biatches, look what *I* got!" I hold up the phone, wave it victoriously in the air.

Poor, clueless, conformist boho Theo glares at me from over by the door, where he's dumping an armful of crap into a cardboard box. What's the deal with the beaded rainbow choker, the equally flaming friendship bracelets and anklets? Yeah, yeah—we were all there when he asserted his spunk via the stylish new windswept hairstyle and plush mini-Dragon Ball hanging from his right ear. But this new additional bling? I know he's not gay, and he sure as hell isn't a beach bum. Unless I missed the memo?

"Dude, you shouldn't be here." He pays my cardigan and corduroy combo a critical glance (I've taken to going fully-dressed as of late—my way of sticking it to the Man). "You shouldn't be here, and you shouldn't be dressed."

"Why the hell not?" I ask.

"Lockdown. The Boho Mandate."

"Lockdowns are for losers." I lower my phone, disappointed. "How're things? Still darling?"

Theo narrows his eyes. "Still pregnant?"

"Like a mofo." I survey the rest of the room. It's cleaner and more tidy than usual—if that's even possible. "What's with the box of crap?"

"I'm...clearing things out," Theo explains.

Somehow his Best Tail award has found its way into the box. I reach in and pick it up. "Can I have this, then?"

"Take it. It's yours."

Tempting. I've never won anything in my life. This perky, gilded tail *would* look good sitting on my computer tower. So would that Funko Trump Special Suntan Edition, and those novelty *Turbo Kid* Apple Heart Breath Mints— "Hey, you've got, like, all your best bling in here! What gives?"

"I told you, I'm clearing things out."

Handing Theo my phone and the Best Tail, I drop to my knees and start digging through his trove of wonders. Every collectible that used to be arranged around his bedroom with meticulous *feng shui* consideration is now crammed into this box. "There's clearing things out, and then there's *this!*" I exclaim. "Are you dying or something?"

"I'm becoming a Shakaist," Theo says.

"A what?"

"It's a minimalist subculture." He hands me my phone. "Look it up."

I set aside the Trump, the Best Tail and breath mints, and do a Web search. It's all a bunch of pictures of and articles about white people dressed boho and hugging trees, doing yoga, eating sticks and leaves, sleeping naked—and now I totally get Theo's new hippie bling. "So, once the Boho Mandate is lifted, you're just going to continue prancing your darling rack around on a regular basis?"

"I'm not going to *prance* anything—"

"And so, like, when it's bedtime, and a normal person goes from street clothes to underwear, you're going from shorts to nothing?"

"So? What's wrong with sleeping naked?"

I frown. "I don't know. Tossing and turning all night with nothing between the blankets and your farting butthole and frothing dong...it sounds kind of dirty. Besides, it's not the sleeping naked part that's bad, it's the waking up naked during an earthquake, the floating naked out into the street during a flash flood, the being thrown naked over the shoulder of a firefighter rescuing you from a flaming inferno."

Theo folds his arms. "I'm not going to start sleeping naked, just so you know. That's for the hardcore Shakaists. Are you done criticizing my choice of lifestyle?"

"One more." I huff and puff myself back into a standing position. "The day you decide to run screaming into the forest, you'll text me first so that I can pick up your video game collection, right?"

Theo spreads his arms. "So what if I want to become a Shakaist? A nudist or hippie, even? So what if I want to hang from the trees and eat bananas all day?"

My mouth drops open—

"That last one's a metaphor, by the way."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Um, yeah." Theo shakes his head, smiles sadly at me. "You don't get it. I'm happy here."

"Where's 'here?'"

"My inner jungle."

"What does that even mean?"

"You'd understand if you'd read the literature."

"I understand that you're giving away all your worldly possessions because you think it'll somehow magically fix you or make you a better person."

"I'm relaxed. I'm thinking clearly. I'm part of something I believe in. I'm..." Theo folds his arms, stands straight. "...confident for once in my life."

"And all you had to do was join a solarpunk cult to do it."

"Hey, my parents separated last week. Cut me some slack."

"So? My parents *died!* Wal-Mart stampede! But you don't see me flipping out over it!"

"No, you just decide you're pregnant and go chasing after an evil cassette tape."

"Ouch, bruh."

# Faceplant

**@ernie**

I sit on Theo's bed, taking care to keep at the very edge so as not to touch any part where his unencumbered bottom may have recently been. "Did your parents really split up?"

Theo sits, too, and toys offhandedly with one of his crap box's flaps. "My dad moved out, yeah."

"What for?"

"Reasons."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Why do people do that?"

"Do what?"

"They tell you they're sorry for your loss when they can't possibly know what you're going through."

"Dude. Wal-Mart stampede."

"That's different. Your parents are dead. You have no choice in the matter. Mine are still alive. They *have* a choice and are ignoring it."

We continue in silence for a few minutes, me in my bulky pants and sweater, the solarpunk here looking better boho than he ever did fully-dressed. It's starting to tick me off, so I slide back onto my feet and say, "Forget this feeling sorry for yourself crap. Come on." I head for the door.

"What're you doing?" Theo asks, standing and fidgeting, fidgeting and standing.

"*We're* sneaking outside."

"But the lockdown—"

"Some fresh air will do the baby good." I pat my stomach. "No ifs, ands, butts, or vaginas—get dressed and let's *gew*."

Theo's looking traumatized by the very *idea* of going outside during lockdown. For a moment I'm thinking he might curl up in bed with the blanket pulled up to his chin. But I know he wants to go, the way he gazes thoughtfully into thin air and calms, smiles, and did you hear that faint jungle beat just now? He nods at me, shuts himself in the closet. Emerging a moment later dressed in his usual joggers and hoodie, he grabs his spray bottle, puts his finger to his lips, and motions for me to follow him into the hallway. We tiptoe downstairs, past his mom's closed yoga studio door. She's blasting peppy house music, and it sounds like she's either working out or having sex or maybe both. Theo doesn't seem to notice; he stops at

the shoe cubby near the front door—and accidentally does a face-plant into the wall while trying to shod himself. Like, he starts using one of his feet to dislodge his shoes from the cubby, meanwhile leaning toward the wall with his arm extended for leverage—and then he just eats it for no reason at all.

I freeze in place, listening.

His mom's grunts and groans continue unabated.

"Luck be with us, doofus," I whisper to Theo, and shake my head. "What the heck's the matter with you? Is the weight of your mighty Dragon Ball throwing off your center of gravity?"

Theo rubs his face and finishes putting his shoes on. Then, carefully and quietly and with a tad more elegance this time, he opens the front door and lets us out.

Into the sinister twilight.

# The Pedestrians

**@ernie**

Poinsettia Street is quiet and motionless, the neighbors' houses freeze-framed beneath the cerulean gradient of an early evening sky. Maybe near-total silence is normal in the countryside, but in the suburbs, it's...unnatural. Eerie, even. You should hear cars, sirens, dogs barking; you should smell exhaust, cigarettes, weed; you should see people, joggers, mailmen, couples hand in hand, kids playing. Instead there are just the afterimages of life: parked cars, abandoned toys on empty lawns, indiscriminate flickerings behind curtained windows. You *know* there are people out here, you just can't *see* them. We're all alone together.

Me and Theo exit the cul-de-sac and walk down the block. The rustle of our overly-clothed bodies is deafening. We don't dare speak aloud for fear of being discovered. By who or what, I'm not sure. I just know the world will likely crack in half if we so much as whisper.

Instead, we text:

**evil_ernie:** this is creppy
**son_of_distant_earth:** Yeah.
**son_of_distant_earth:** It's like something out of a Hitchcock movie.
**evil_ernie:** hey u changed yor screename
**son_of_distant_earth:** You barely noticed?
**evil_ernie:** i noticed i was just commeting
**son_of_distant_earth:** Sure you wereeee

*Thwump!*

Shoot—I'd been so engrossed in my phone that I hadn't noticed the old pedestrian dude coming up the sidewalk until we'd literally bumped into each other. The poor bastard lets out a startled gasp as he drops butt-first onto the pavement.

"Oh, geez, sorry, mister!" Theo blurts, and immediately rushes forward to help the pedestrian dude up.

I'm more forthright: "Who the hell are you?"

"Leonard Mead," replies the pedestrian, brushing himself off once he's back on his feet. It should be noted that he's fully-dressed, like us. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"What are you doing outside? It's lockdown."

Theo frowns at me.

"I like to walk," Leonard explains. "I enjoy the fresh air, the exercise, the *motion*." He gestures at me, at Theo. Leans in close. "I thought I was the only one."

"Huh?"

"You're fully-clothed."

I fist-bump Theo. "Damn straight."

Leonard nods affirmatively. He looks like he wants to say something that's exceedingly counterculture, but the sound of a car peeling out down the street catches the three of us off guard. Like criminals caught in the act, we leer left, right, up...and there it is. That something fluttering in the air that triggers my instinct to scream "rogue ember!" while shoving Theo and Leonard into harm's way. But wait, it's just a lone cherry blossom meandering on the breeze.

We watch it flutter to the ground.

As the breeze settles.

And we start breathing again.

"I should be getting home," Leonard rasps, and hurries on his way. He disappears around the corner.

Theo nudges me, motions for me to check my phone.

**son_of_distant_earth:** Dude, you ever hear of that old Ray Bradbury story?
**evil_ernie:** roy who?

## Text of Kin

**@theo**

**son_of_distant_earth:** Hey, Dad.
**son_of_distant_earth:** How're things?
**mike4125:** Good. How about you?
**son_of_distant_earth:** Good.
**son_of_distant_earth:** How's Grandma Hong?
**mike4125:** Same as always.
**son_of_distant_earth:** That's good. How's work?
**mike4125:** Mr. Megalomoto has me set up remotely.
**mike4125:** How about you? Are you keeping up with your homework?
**son_of_distant_earth:** Yeah. They have us doing online classes. Mr. Barchetta keeps leaning into his webcam every time he talks. I think he thinks the microphone won't pick up his voice.
**mike4125:** Funny.
**son_of_distant_earth:** Yeah.
**mike4125:** :-P

...

**son_of_distant_earth:** Miss you, Dad.
**mike4125:** Miss you too, kiddo.

## The Ninety-Nine-Cent Question

**@theo**

It sounds like Mr. Megalomoto's over again. I can hear him yelling cheerfully downstairs. Shouldn't he be on lockdown? Commissioner Faustman had said on the news that people are supposed to be staying home, either alone or with their families. Does this mean Megalomoto's counting himself as part of our family now? Unless he simply doesn't care. Not everyone skimped when the Boho Mandate went into effect. Not everyone's stayed inside this past week during lockdown. Me and Ernie (and likely countless other Leonard Mead dudes) snuck out. Maybe that's all this is: Mr. Megalomoto sneaking out.

And hitting on my mom.

"What's up, little dude?" Beta asks, appearing at my bedside.

"Texting my dad," I reply. I set down my phone. "How about you?"

"Stretching my legs. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"You just did." My uber-lame attempt at humor.

Beta sits at my desk and swivels the chair around so that he's facing me. "So... you know my deal. You've talked to shakabrah. He thinks we should liberate the code, I think we should wait, and in the meantime more and more time passes."

"Is that why he wanted to get in touch with you?"

"That's about the size of it. We kind of made a pact to do it together or not at all. Trouble is, he's ready to go, and me...I'm not so sure."

"How come?"

Beta looks thoughtful. "That's the ninety-nine-cent question. SuperMegaNet encodes you into a compressed data stream, sends that stream to whatever computer, phone, or server you want, then decodes you however you want. You can upload a blond, download a brunette. Start as an endomorph, end as a mesomorph. Upload an amputee, download with all your arms and legs intact. It's all software. The tech has always been there—it's just been a matter of rolling out the features publicly when the time is right."

"So...now's not right time?"

"shakabrah thinks it is. He says the code should all be out there, every last byte. Let the public work out the kinks through daily usage rather than wait for some corporate or government agency to patent the technology away for their own purposes. But the implications are...ginormous. Releasing the code means we'd be giving the masses the ability to *cure* with the swipe of a finger what the pharmaceutical companies would have you believe can be *managed* with billions

upon billions of dollars per year. We'd also be making the entire world hackable, both for good...and for evil. Uninstalling cancer, deleting birth defects, eliminating old age...but also facilitating the passing around of memes like *El Cassetto*."

I try to look unconcerned. "Is that still a thing?"

"Sorry. It's the first example that came to mind. The point is, with SuperMegaNet liberated, the world becomes an ideal overnight. Or it becomes a dystopia."

"It kind of seems like the world's *already* a dystopia, Beta."

"Still, should I give the power to the people, and will they be better for it? Is that even my decision to make?"

I chuckle, though inside I'm reeling from the implications of trying to answer a question which I have absolutely no idea how to answer.

Luckily, I don't have to, because Eva suddenly downloads into my room looking flustered and impatient. "Hey, Theo, I—" she begins, but stops when she notices Beta. "Oh, hi, Beta."

"Hey, Eva."

"Is this a bad time?"

Beta smirks. "It's always a bad time, isn't it? Thanks for the talk, little dude." He nods, gives me a Picard-esque hand gesture to either go to warp or send him home.

Seeing as how my phone doesn't have warp capability, I opt to send him home.

"What's up?" I ask Eva once we're alone.

"I need you to do me a favor," she says.

"What's that?"

"I need you to be my boyfriend."

## Chilton, Is It?

**@eva**

Let's back up a sec, and I'll explain.

I'm back in my bedroom after dinner when I happen to find Summer and some gorgeous, well-proportioned, about to burst from his Oxford shirt and designer jeans guy sitting on my bed.

"Um, hi?" I say.

"We have to talk, babe." Summer gestures at the jeans guy. "This is Chilton Forbes."

I close and lock the door behind me. "Who?"

Chilton stands up, holds out his hand. "Chilton—"

"Allow me, darling," Summer interrupts, and stands as well. She puts her hands on her hips. "He was one of the many beefcakes you ignored at your birthday party, Eva."

Was he?

"He's a freshman at Fortcroft, is into The Weeknd, has excellent personal hygiene, and he knows how to French kiss."

OMFG—is Summer trying to hook me up with a pre-selected love interest? "You know, we're supposed to be on lockdown."

"*Meh.* That's a San Angelico thing."

I fold my arms. "Chilton, is it?"

"Huh?" he asks with all the charm and wit of a flexed bicep.

"Go play with my dolls."

"Uh, okay."

I watch him step into my *Nightmare* grove, trailing cologne and faint sparkles in a subtle, almost imperceptibly affluent wake, every morsel of him a work of art to behold. This is what I'm supposed to like. Older boy. Tall. Chiseled supermodel face and jawline. Blond locks. Obnoxiously fragrant. For a split-second I'm worried why I'm not feeling anything more than a passing appreciation. Then it hits me: it's because he *expects* me to. I can see it in his eyes, the way he's looking at me, not only confident, but *cocky*. He's a hundred-percent sure that I've already said yes to going out with him. He's already planned out our first date, our first kiss, our first time.

Well, I don't want to be *assigned* a boyfriend, I want to pick one on my *own*.

"What's the deal?" I ask Summer.

"No offense," she replies, "but you Angelicans are a crazy bunch. Bikinis and

lockdowns? Spray bottles and sheen checks? Wake up and smell the hair spray, babe. I'm here to help you out. Do what you've got to do, your love life doesn't have to suffer in the meantime. That's where I—that's where *Chilton* comes in. Babe." She snaps her finger at him. "Tell Eva about yourself."

Chilton (rapidly becoming entangled in puppetry) smiles, showing off perfect teeth. "Hi. I'm Chilton. I'm fourteen and a freshman at Fortcroft High. I listen to The Weeknd, and I love boba drinks."

*Puleeze.*

Summer does her best saleswoman impression: "They say *El Cassetto* is out to get you. They want you to stay at home going nowhere and doing nothing. I say nuts to that. Now is your time to live! You're a teenager, doll. You need to *accessorize*. And Chilton here has *all* the right accessories."

Now almost completely lost within the *Nightmare* grove, Chilton mumbles something that sounds like, "*Shaka, brah.*"

# Dating Up

**@eva**

"Just like that?" I ask. "You snap your fingers and he's cool with dating me?"

"It's natural selection," Summer replies. "Girls date up. That means boys have no choice but to date down. Girls who're Chilton's age, the Fourteens, they go after the Fifteens and the Sixteens. The Thirteens, we get the Fourteens—aka, the Leftovers."

"Okay, I don't want to be dating anyone's *leftovers*."

"Double standard, babe. Way of the world."

"Well, it's dumb."

"Hey, my hands are tied. I don't make the rules."

"It doesn't matter anyway because I already, um, have a boyfriend."

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

Summer's entire face is agape. "Shut up! You do *not* have a boyfriend!"

"I do."

"Not!"

"Do."

"*Who?*"

"Just someone I, uh, know."

"I want to see him. Right here, right now." Summer narrows her eyes. "That is, if he actually exists?"

I should probably make excuses citing lockdown rules, but, then, both Summer and Chilton have already been in my bedroom tonight. What's one more? "I'll, uh, be right back," I mumble. I take out my phone and, in a split-second decision between Theo, Ernie, and Jan, I swipe myself out, returning a moment later with Theo in tow.

"Wait, what's..." Theo blinks at Summer, at the rustling *Nightmare* grove. "... going on?"

"Oh, nothing, *boyfriend*." I put my arm around him. "Just missing you, *boyfriend*." I kiss him on the cheek.

Confetti explodes out of his right ear.

Flutters to the floor.

"*Hai, Theo...*" It looks like Summer's about to go into one of her *chibi* dazes, but she shakes it off, frowns in Chilton's general direction. "Babe. A moment alone."

The *Nightmare* grove rustles some more. "Um, I'm kind of having trouble finding my way back."

Grabbing my phone, Summer swipes out the Forbester. Then she faces me full. "Okay, exactly what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?" I ask innocently.

"That—" Summer points at Theo. "—is *not* your boyfriend."

"Sure he is."

"A fanboy, someone's darling little brother, maybe, but *boyfriend*?"

"We're a couple. Really." I clasp Theo's hand.

"Since when?"

"Since, uh...my birthday party, right after you left. We hit it off."

"You hit it off."

I nudge Theo in the ribs.

"Um, yeah," he says. "I, er, stayed after to help Eva clean up."

Pretending to be lost in his eyes for a sec, I add, "No one's ever done that for me before. It was love at first sight."

Summer doesn't look convinced. "I don't know what kind of sick, twisted game you're playing, but you can *not* be dating *Theo*." She smiles at his abdomen, this time unable to resist going full *chibi*. "*Hai... Theo...*"

I peck him on the cheek once more, clasp his hand tighter.

A sparkler shoots out from his shorts.

Summer looks both jealous and disappointed, can only make a strangled noise at the back of her throat as she fumbles with my phone, swipes her *chibi* self back home. "*Bai... Theo...*"

The sparkler fizzles out.

I let Theo go. Face him with arms folded firmly. "Okay, here's the deal. We've been dating since my birthday party. Update all your social media relationship statuses. Goodnight." I swipe him home.

**@theo**

What.
Just.
Happened?

## Status Update

**@ernie**

So, Bug Eyes is dating Goten?
No frickin' way.

# Skimpy Savages in Suburban Cages

**@theo**

No sooner am I back in my room than James Taylor's "Her Town Too" starts playing.

Mini, who'd been sprawled on my bed while messing with my phone, now jumps to his feet and huffs mightily into a plush party horn that makes no sound.

"What's with the James Taylor?" I ask.

"Wrong playlist entry," Mini admits. "But the underlying plot point remains intact: you and Eva are now officially a couple. *Let the swapping of bodily fluids commence!*" He drops the horn, starts twerking my phone.

"Stop that!" I dart forward, grabbing the phone and shoving him aside. "Anyway, I don't even know if we're really dating."

"She *did* say, 'We've been dating since my birthday party. Update all your social media relationship statuses.' Right?"

"Well, yeah."

"What more do you want? Notarized documents?" Mini resumes his gyrations.

Sheesh. It's like I'm talking to a plush doll.

I get into bed with my phone. Update my relationship status. Stare unblinking at the ceiling until the lights go out and the air-conditioner sputters to a halt. It's dead quiet except for the sound of Mini's hips still thrusting in the darkness.

"But are we *really* going out?" I finally ask.

"Dude, we *just* discussed this." *Thrust-thrust.*

"I know, but...Eva's never shown any interest in me whatsoever before today. Like, we've had our moments as friends who respect and care about each other, but she's never looked at me the way she looks at Jan."

"Why would she? You're not Jan."

"Don't remind me."

The thrusting stops; I can feel a tugging at the blanket as Mini works his way onto the bed. "You can't base how she looks at you on how she looks at someone else. Maybe she *doesn't* look at you the way she looks at Jan. Maybe instead she's always sort of been into you, but she never pursued it because the way you used to dress made you look like a fourth-grader. Now that she's seen your bodacious rack, and is relatively assured of your manly inches, maybe she's open to pursuing some action with you and your enormous—"

"Don't say it."

"—bank account."

"Eva seems pretty well-off without needing to date a guy for his cash."

"You realize I was using money as a euphemism for your wang, right?"

I sigh. "Everything you say is a euphemism for my wang."

"Okay. How about this. Along with everyone else on the Internet, she saw you the night you made it with Asia Afrodesia, and she's jealous."

"Except I didn't actually make it with Asia Afrodesia."

"Doesn't matter. You were desired by a competing womb, and so Eva's primordial instincts are urging her to fend off other females who might steal you away as their mate."

I glare at Mini (pointlessly, as it's pitch-dark). "This isn't the caveman days."

"Says the Shakaist dude currently sleeping without power or air-conditioning."

"You know what I mean."

"Just...run with it. Don't try to understand women or dating in general. Hold Eva's hand, kiss her, get to third base and/or home, if she'll let you—"

"Okay, Freud."

"All I'm saying is, see where it goes, and worry about it not going anywhere *after* it's not going anywhere."

"Goodnight, Mini."

"Goodnight, lover boy."

Without the air-conditioner, my room's already starting to feel stuffy. I get out of bed, walk over to the window, and slide it all the way open. Stark moonlight illuminates the cul-de-sac, turning everything film noir. Across the street, a boy my age is similarly at his bedroom window, and is staring back at me. We share this moment together, the two of us skimpy savages entombed in suburban cages. Then the boy points off to the side. I swivel, glimpsing the house at the end of the street...and there crouched upon a neighbor's rooftop is a...gargoyle? Blowing bubbles? No, not your everyday, average soap bubbles, but some kind of flammable filament which the creature ignites with a lighter as he sends each plume into the air. I watch the burning embers flutter away on the breeze before locking eyes with the gargoyle—who seems to be surprised that I can see him. Literally, he drops what he's doing and scurries up the roof, disappearing onto the other side.

I look back at the window across the street.

But the boy's gone.

I close my window and shut the curtain, deciding I'll sweat it out tonight rather than risk midnight gargoyles climbing into my room and setting me on fire while I sleep. I'm about to take out my special contacts when I realize Mini's using my phone's flashlight to illuminate a handwritten card and bottle of bow-tied cologne propped on my bed.

"These just came for you," he says in response to my raised eyebrows.

I pick up the cologne, examine the label by phonelight:

**Ladykiller**
(Fragrance for the
Self-Assured)

The card reads:

*You're dating my little girl now.*
*Look good, smell good, be good.*
*Don't mess this up.*
*—Summer*
*xoxo*
*hai, theo...*

Setting down the card, the cologne, I just sort of sit and bask in the new abnormal for a while.

# Faux Schlong

**@ernie**

Days, weeks, or maybe even millennia later (who knows anymore?), night's fallen over Tacoman's shabby taqueria. Don't knock my poncho and sombrero combo; just because you think I look like a *piñata* perched on a bar stool doesn't make it true. Jerk. I've got a plate of five tacos lined up in front of me—*carne pasada*, *pastoral*, *cheechandchong*, *caveza*, and the obligatory *polio*—though I've hardly touched any of it.

Nearby, another customer suddenly grabs his bottom with both hands and makes a beeline for the nearest cactus.

Tacoman clears away the guy's leftovers, wipes down the counter.

"Hey, Tacoman," I say, despondent.

(Off in the not-so-distance, a mighty diarrhea is loosened into the night.)

"Why you no eat, *mi gordito*?" Tacoman asks.

"Eh. I've got a lot on my mind lately. War. Politics. Abstinence. It's all bunk. I've never had sex and I'm pregnant. What a rip-off. It kind of makes me think I should've been banging chicks all along just so I could've gotten a few good orgasms out of the deal. I mean, I've basically become the virgin who picked up HIV from a toilet seat. How uncool is that?"

Tacoman glares at me, gestures at the far end of the patio. "You sit there now. Keep away from customers' appetite."

"Hey, is that any way to treat your best customer—?"

"And *esta* Ta·CO·man, not TA·co·man. *Soy de Tacoma, mi gordito.*"

"Really?" I blink at him. "What was I saying?"

Tacoman shoos me away.

I take my plate and head over to the far end of the patio. There's a small table here that's half occupied by this familiar-looking Chinese bodybuilder dude nursing chips and a beer. I sit across from him, here in the borderlands of the taco stand, here where the ground is littered with used napkins and broken glass, here where the chili lights strung above flicker uncertainly, here where not even the Lost Souls themselves dare tread (they're in the *other* dank corner).

"Mind if I join you?" I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. "Tacoman's being a dick."

"Sure." The bodybuilder dude makes room, glances inquisitively at my sombrero.

I can't help but notice he's three-quarters of the way through his beer, and yet

his tacos remain uneaten. "Are you going to finish those?"

"I'm actually a vegetarian. I just ordered these because...I'm not sure." The bodybuilder dude slides his plate toward me—

—and suddenly I realize why he looks so familiar. "Wait, are you Theo's dad?"

"You know Theo?"

"I'm his best friend."

Theo's muscle daddy waves away the light bulb that's just popped into the air above his head; it falls to the floor and shatters faintly. "Ernest, right?"

"In the flesh."

"Do your parents know you're eating at *La Taqueria de Las Almas Perdidas*?"

"My parents are dead. Wal-Mart stampede."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Hey, shat happens, right?" Note that Theo's muscle daddy's hoodie is stretched taught across a massive rack I'm fairly sure he didn't possess a month ago. "Why are *you* killing time here?"

Theo's muscle daddy sighs. "I'm dealing with some family issues."

"What kind of family issues?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

"Mr. Ivanovich—"

"Call me Mike."

"—this is the Taqueria of Lost Souls. Worrying and wallowing is what we *do*."

Mike doesn't respond immediately. I can tell he's assuming that just because I'm a teenager I'm incapable of engaging in conversations involving anything more emotionally complex than the repercussions of an ill-timed fart during math class. But he's also hard up for someone to talk to. "I'm...having difficulty coming to terms with the fact that Theo's surpassed me in nearly every way."

"Preaching to the choir. Welcome to the club." I reach into my poncho and pull out a novelty membership card, which I hand to Mike.

He smiles amusedly, tucks the card into his pocket. "I know I should be happy for him. I should be *proud* of what he has and what he's accomplished, and at such an early age. Proud son, beautiful wife, successful family, right? Yet these days I feel like a houseguest in my own home. Sometimes I feel like a kept man, Ernest."

"I don't know what that is."

Mike sighs. "It's when a man lives off the provisions of his beautiful wife and talented kid."

"Wait, I thought you worked as an office jock or something."

"I *do*, and I make good enough money at it. I just feel like I'm too adequate sometimes."

"I can relate," I say. "I'm the trophy fat. Theo and the rest of my friends are all stacked and attractive and loaded as heck. Well, not Janny Boy. He's poorer than a burlap sack. But still shredded cheddar, and it makes me feel like he and the others hang with me to fill some kind of quota."

"A quota—that's exactly what I'd call it, Ernest." Mike downs the rest of his beer. Then he stares at the empty bottle as if the answer to all his problems is

written somewhere on the label. "Where did the time go? I thought I had a few more years before Theo pulled ahead. Fifteen, sixteen years old, maybe. But *twelve?* No warning signs, no peach fuzz mustache or pimples or cracking voice—just *bam!* Superior *kung fu*. Gifted young man who doesn't need me or his mother anymore than he needs diapers or a pacifier."

I glance forlornly at my taco plate. "Mike, I feel the same way."

"You do, huh?"

"Theo's precociousness, it's literally ruining lives. The gang dynamic is totally out of whack now. We're supposed to have a fat kid, a geek, a jock, and a girl. But two crossfits, a fatty, and a Goten blessed with superior *wang shui*? How does *that* work? I mean, how much spunk does one man need?"

Mike looks confused. "Spunk?"

"Yeah. You know."

Mike doesn't seem to know.

"Wait, just to be clear, we're talking about Theo's dong, right?"

Without another word, Mike gets up from the table, goes over to Tacoman's laptop, and clicks out.

Well.

That was awkward.

## It's not the doughnuts that eat me...

**@eva**

Me and Theo are having doughnuts at our usual table outside of 3 Hags'. Well, not exactly. It *is* our usual table, and it *is* outside the infamous Hags' gingerbread house, but it's not the *original* 3 Hags'. It's a SuperMegaNet server. "Due to DOSVID-19," most local businesses have moved online—literally—and 3 Hags' Doughnuts is no exception.

Theo, seated beside me, takes a bite of his usual gluten-free standard glaze and chews thoughtfully. "Huh. It tastes just like a real doughnut."

"Of course it does," I say. "Why wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. I've never really eaten food online. Do you think they make these here on the server, or do they make them actual, and then upload to order?"

"All good questions." I've got my camera with me. I aim it at us, leaning against Theo and framing a cutesy shot in the viewfinder. "Say cheese." I snap a selfie, then hit the playback button. Theo's got this epic *huh?* expression on his face. I snap another shot, this time pecking him on the cheek. Playback. His expression is still *huh?*—although for another reason entirely.

"What was that for?" he asks.

"We're a couple, right?"

"Um, yeah."

"Couples kiss and hold hands and sit together instead of across from each other, dork."

"Oh, right."

It's a bright, sunny virtual afternoon, so I fiddle with the settings on my camera to bring down the highs just a bit for my next selfie involving a peace sign and fish lips. "*Cheeeese.*"

Theo smiles awkwardly. He looks like Chandler from *Friends*.

And *blech*, I'm an absolute lollipop.

I take one more selfie, this time with no planning, no posing, no peace signs, no fish lips. Theo's jaw is contorted crookedly in mid-doughnut-mouthful, and I'm frowning with my eyes half-closed. But the *bokeh* is sublime. And you know what? It's our best shot yet—because it's *real*.

"We look like sugar junkies," Theo comments, grimacing when I show him.

"*Meh.* It's not the doughnuts that eat me, it's me who eats the doughnuts." Sending the photo to my phone, I do a quick edit before uploading to Instagram.

"What do you do with all the photos you take?"

Holding out my phone for Theo to see, I swipe through my timeline.

He smiles appreciatively, then gets real quiet, munches real slow as he seems to gaze intently at a point somewhere just behind my phone's screen. "Eva?"

I inadvertently find myself staring at the point as well. "Yeah?"

"Are we really going out, or is this just for Summer's benefit?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know."

I think I do—and darn it that he's figured things out so quickly. But there's more to it than mere convenience. Yeah, I'd grabbed him unaware the other night and volunteered him as my emergency boyfriend, and yeah, that totally bothers me. What bothers me more is...I really *do* like Theo. Maybe not in a jump-his-bones kind of way, but I do care deeply for him. He rescued me from a freakin' *demogorgonzola* once. I don't take that lightly. We're more than friends. That's why it makes me feel like poo to be using him as a weapon in my ongoing battle against Summer Jackson's incessant matchmaking. I don't want to date Theo just to keep from dating Chilton.

Suddenly I'm leaning over and kiss him. On the mouth. No camera this time, no pretense. I want to say I'm proving to Theo that I'm genuinely not using him as a tool for personal gain, but really I'm trying to prove it to *myself*. The kiss doesn't change anything; I don't feel any differently about Theo now than I did a few minutes ago, though I'm willing to acknowledge that he *is* a good kisser. Like, you look at him and you see this little dweeb, and you think he can't possibly know anything about making out, but when it comes time to swap some spit, his mouth shifts effortlessly into sexy mode. It's timing and confidence, both of which you do *not* expect from Theo. It's enough to get me thinking that maybe, *maybe* it's not so bad dating him. He's barely younger than I am. In a short while he'll be thirteen, too, and then I can't use the age difference excuse anymore. He'll just be a regular ol' boy my age who looks nice, smells nice, kisses nice, *is* nice. Do I really care that he's small and shy and geekly and into video games and the band Asia—

—or do I care that *other* people care?

# Henry Potwasher and the Chambermaid of Secretions

**@eva**

A piece of Theo's doughnut has ended up in my mouth, which is either gross or sexy depending on how you look at it. "I'm worried about Ernie," I say, swallowing, fiddling with my camera, playing with settings I've already set, and generally pretending like the kiss that just happened didn't just happen.

Theo gets the hint, and also pretends. "How come?"

"Um, hello, he thinks a cassette tape got him pregnant."

"So?"

"*So*, we can't just leave him like that. We've got to *do* something."

Theo smirks. "We could throw him a baby shower."

"I'm being serious."

"Sorry."

"He's missing school."

"I know. It's been nice."

"*Theo—"*

"Sorry, sorry—"

I punch him in the shoulder.

"*Ow!"*

"Is that all Ernie is to you? The butt of a joke?"

"Really, Eva. He's managing. We went for a walk the other night..." Theo leans in close, whispers the rest: "*...past curfew.*"

"Ooh, you're *such* a rebel."

"He's got a cell phone now."

"Finally?"

"Yeah. It's from Lindy Mobile. It runs on kerosene."

I try unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh by tucking my head against Theo's shoulder. Then I straighten and sober. "I checked his video feed yesterday, and he was just sitting there at his desk reading. *Reading*."

"What, like an actual book?"

"Mm-hm. Something called *Henry Potwasher and the Chambermaid of Secretions*."

"Ah." Theo smirks again. "I wouldn't worry. With a title like that, I doubt he was reading so much as he was fapping."

"*Ew..."*

"But reading's reading, right? Maybe Ernie's finally found his literary niche, and will spend more time using his *brain* instead of his *stomach*."

I frown. "It's no good if he's just masturbating and researching friggin' *El Cassetto* day and night. He's succumbing to mass hysteria. You realize that, don't you?"

"Sure. Ernie's mass is hysterical."

Face. Shoulder. Guffaw. "You're no help at all..."

# The Unbearable Weirdness of Being

**@eva**

"If you ask me," Mini says, suddenly crawling out from inside Theo's messenger bag unannounced, "which you probably should've in the first place, Ernie's trying to find meaning in this whole cassette tape business. He's looking for attention. He's looking for...*validation*."

I scooch away from Theo a tad and glare at Mini. "Have you been here this whole time?"

"Always and forever, toots."

Theo facepalms himself.

Mini boosts himself onto the tabletop, sits facing us with his plush legs swinging cheerfully over the edge. "Ernie sees Jan making money, he sees Theo's spunk developing, Eva's wearing makeup and throwing lavish birthday parties, and it's like, WTF? He was the first of us to turn thirteen. He should be the alpha, the elder, the *senpai*. Instead, he's become the lackey of the group. He feels left behind."

"How do you know all this?" Theo asks.

"Me and your subconscious play strip poker while you sleep."

"Wait," I say, "does Theo have a different plush doll for each and every aspect of his psyche?"

Theo blinks questioningly at Mini. "Do I?"

"That's another discussion for another time," Mini replies. "My point here is, we're all going places, doing things, getting rich, growing up. Meanwhile, Ernie's still just fat, obnoxious Ernie. He needs to be *right* about something. He needs to feel appreciated. Yeah, he's crude and crass and smells like the inside of a Little Debbie box, but all that's a defense mechanism for a tender soul terrified of being rejected by the big, bad world."

"Ernie? Tender?" Theo snorts. "*Ha!*"

I give both Theos an imploring look. "Clearly you're onto something. The question is, how do we help Ernie work this whole *El Cassetto* thing out for what it is? How do we show him that we care—"

"We do?"

"Oh, stop. You know we do."

"We do *what*, exactly?" asks Mini.

"*You know.*"

"Say it."

"What?"

"I want to hear it from your mouth."

"Okay, this is weird."

"What, you're still not over the talking doll thing?"

"I'm *totally* not over the talking doll thing. But it's also everything else. The skimping and social distancing, spray bottles and sheen checks, virtual doughnuts instead of real ones, Theo's parents splitting up, Ernie thinking he's pregnant, Jan mining Bloodcoin... I get it. We can't make a dent in the big stuff like dosequisvirus or the stupid Boho Mandate, but maybe it's not too late to save Ernie from himself." I clasp Theo's hand. "If you don't go talk to him, then I will."

"Like you did with Jan down in Thrill-Kill's crypto-carnival?" Mini chides.

I scowl at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Theo hems and haws apologetically. "What does anything he says ever mean?"

"What I *mean*," Mini says, "is that maybe instead of *trying* to get the Runt Squad back together, the lesson here is that you just need to *let* it happen naturally. Maybe that's why we're all going off in different directions these days—because we're *trying* to make it work."

We all sit quietly and let that sink in for sec.

Eventually, Theo clears his throat and asks no one in particular, "So...what's the plan?"

I say, "The plan is to think of a plan."

## Dreaming Wide Awake

**@eva**

This may have something to do with it, I don't know, but I happen to be doomscrolling *El Cassetto* misinformation at bedtime when I fall asleep and wind up having the weirdest dream. Like, it's this half-dream, half-out-of-body-experience deal where one minute I'm staring dully at my phone, the next I'm floating suspended above my bed. I can see my room down below in total clarity despite the darkness. My *The Nightmare Before Christmas* dolls stand in their grove like silent sentries. Sally's got a worried look on her face, and is pointing urgently at me—at my *body*, that is—lying slumped, light from my phone casting eerily across my face.

(Holy crap, the natural bulbousness of my eyes is *so* much more pronounced when I'm lit from beneath!)

I start to toss and turn. I'm not sure why, but then I hear it, faint at first, more pronounced as the moments pass: Mexican *banda* music.

I toss and turn some more.

Wait, is that a boombox on one of my bedside tables—?

Suddenly I'm back in my body. My eyes fly open, and I jolt upright in bed, heart hammering, hair mussed, sweat beading, something dangling out of my ear—no, something trying to wriggle *into* my ear. I grab it, yank hard, and find myself holding a peculiar-looking gummy worm shaped like a...a giant...musical note—?

I wake up again.

And—

# Pole-Slammed

**@ernie**

Dude, reading is *awesome*. Did you know the literary world is teeming with boobs, butts, and crotches flying around all over the place? *Did you?* You can say the *f* and *s* words in books and it's not censored. I get it now why Theo reads all those books and manga: he's hiding his porn collection in plain sight...though I doubt his parents would ever scold him for it even if they found straight-up dildos and pocket-vaginas lying around his room. They're so progressive New Age they probably encouraged him to masturbate freely at the dinner table or walk around completely naked long before #SheenLife ever became a thing.

Anyway, it's Saturday night, and I'm sitting at my desk and reading something about a poop monster spying on this horny working-class couple banging in their apartment complex jacuzzi when I become vaguely aware that Bug Eyes has just downloaded beside me.

"Ernie."

I keep my head buried in my book. "Huh?"

She taps me on the shoulder and clears her throat. "*Ernie.*"

I ignore her harder, picturing in my head that her body's turned to dandelion dust and is now fluttering away on a nascent breeze.

"Ernie!"

"*What?*"

Eva yanks the book from my hands, swivels me around in my chair so that I'm facing her. "I'm *pregnant!* That's what!"

I look at her for the first time since she downloaded. She's gone against the Mandate by wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants instead of her usual fruit salad one-piece, and is sporting a *total* bun in her heretofore washboard-flat oven. "Holy cow nuggets—you're pregnant!"

"That's what I've been *trying* to tell you, genius."

I reach for her tummy—

She slaps me away, then throws one arm over her face and tosses herself onto my bed. She starts bawling all girlie-style. You know, with the tears and the heaving sobs and the sloppy snorting. "You were right about the whole thing! *El Cassetto*, the pregnancies—I was a fool not to listen, and look where it's gotten me! Oh, what am I going to *do*? I'll be kicked off the wrestling team for sure! My parents will kill me! Poor Theo will probably go into a coma when he finds out! I'm not ready to be a mom!"

I *so* want to point at her and shout, "I told you so!" at the top of my lungs, but the sound catches in my throat, emerging a moment later as an unscripted burp, my arm and accusing finger remaining placid of their own accord. I wanted with all my might to be right about *El Cassetto*, but I don't want to be *this* right. Bug Eyes pregnant at thirteen, life ruined, career as a jockette derailed, her effability score tarnished for life—

—is that Mexican *banda* music I hear playing in the background via Eva's SuperMegaFeed? "Wait, your pole-slamming—did it occur less than ninety minutes ago, aka the full length of a standard C90 cassette tape?"

Eva lifts her head from the bedspread, picks a cookie crumb from her tear-moistened cheek. "Um...can we not refer to my getting pregnant with the phrase 'pole-slamming?'"

"Just—how long's it been?"

"Half an hour, maybe. I was dozing, and—"

A bomb explodes inside my head. "Holy frick! That means *El Cassetto* is still in your room!"

"It does?"

"Eff yeah!"

Eva exchanges a tentative glance with me. "So...what do we do?"

See the expression on my face? This is what overly-dramatic grim determination looks like. In the movie adaptation of SuperMegaNet, this would be the pivotal shot where the camera zooms in on the handsome young actor playing me (I'm going to say Tanner Buchanan, because why not?) as he gazes heroically into the distance and proclaims, "It's...time...to...press...*stop*."

# Into the Nightmare Grove

**@theo**

"Tuck your balls in—we're going slaying!" Ernie booms the very instant he and Eva download beside my bed.

I'd been dozing lightly to Steve Roach's *Stillpoint*, but now I shriek instinctively and yank the blanket up to my chin. "*Hah!*"

"Whoa, what's with you?" I hear Eva ask.

"He's bedroom-shy," Ernie explains disinterestedly. "Scandalous, tragically self-defeating, I know. Come on, junior! We've got a date with a cassette tape!"

I fumble my special contacts from the bedside table and cram them into my eye sockets. It's post-power hour dark except for Ernie's flashlight. He's earmuffed and has warpaint on his face, and is cradling a boombox. Eva, also muffed, is fully-dressed and...pregnant? "What's with the warpaint and earmuffs and, uh, everything?" I'm staring right at Eva's swollen stomach.

She starts to lean in as if she's going to whisper something into my ear—

"No time for making out!" Ernie tosses a pair of earmuffs at me, then grabs my phone from the bedside table and swipes the three of us into a murky bedroom that might've been unidentifiable were it not for the familiar shadowy outline of Eva's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* grove lurking ominously in the background. Mexican *banda* plays softly—

—okay.

*Okay.*

That can *not* be *El Cassetto*.

In Eva's bedroom.

It's got to be a prank, right? I mean, come on! An evil cassette tape that goes around downloading itself into random bedrooms and getting people pregnant? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

Yet I immediately wedge myself between Ernie and Eva.

And put on my earmuffs.

Which, being obvious dollar store fare, do absolutely nothing to drown out the music.

Ernie links his arm in mine. He's sweating profusely. "*Psst!* What's the plan?"

"You're asking me? I don't even know what's going on!"

"Maybe," says Eva, annoyed, "you should've thought this through *before* you brought us here."

"Shut up the both of you and let me think!" Ernie holds me tighter. This would

be awkward under normal circumstances, but it's doubly so with the two of us skimping, me in my board shorts and he in his bath towel. After maybe a minute and a half of the three of us just standing holding each other, Ernie finally brandishes his boombox and says, "Okay. I've got a plan."

"Great. What is it?"

"Distract the tape with your womb, Eves."

Eva goes bug-eyed. Well, more bug-eyed than usual. "*Distract it with my womb?*"

"Yeah. Walk over there, spread your legs, flash your panties, do a little dance or something. Once *El Cassetto's* been mesmerized, I'll sneak up from behind and eject the tape and record over it with smooth jazz."

"How about *you* go and eject the tape while Theo and I watch from right here?"

"Friggin' women. Always expecting the man to stick his neck out on a moment's notice—no wonder we die earlier than you do!" Ernie scowls and lets me go, starts forward. "Where did you last see *El Cassetto*?"

Eva points at the *Nightmare* grove.

What follows is like something out of a war movie parody. Ernie drops onto all fours and starts scooting along the floor, making his way into the grove on his elbows and knees while simultaneously dragging his boombox with one hand and keeping his towel secure with the other. He coughs and hacks inhaling an invisible smog, swats at non-existent mosquitos, and generally looks completely ridiculous. In a moment, he's out of sight, and all we can see is a doll rattling here or wobbling there, and all we can hear is Ernie's muffled choking and swearing.

While *El Cassetto* plays on.

## Theo's Crotch Saves the World

**@ernie**

Don't tell Eves and the kid, but I'm about to wet my towel. Yeah, I may have hurled myself into the fray, but already I'm regretting it because, well, pride's a bitch. Or, if I'm being completely honest, I'm pride's bitch. That's how I got here. And now the darkness presses in heavy all around me. Now an acrid haze hugs the floor; now the spindly limbs of Eva's *Nightmare* dolls claw and grasp at me in their unholy state of living death; now I've slipped into a *The Twilight Zone* rendition of Eva's bedroom. This must be what it was like in NAMM. My arms and legs are trembling, there's sweat blurring my vision—I feel like the deeper I breathe, the less air I'm getting. I'm fading fast. *El Cassetto's* wicked siren song is dragging me down, dragging me under. I can barely keep my eyes open. Jack Skellington bumps into me and topples forward, trapping me in a sordid embrace.

"Really!" I shout, coughing, sputtering. "Who in the holy hell sleeps in a room with life-sized *The Nightmare Before Christmas* dolls?!"

In the distance behind me, Eva calls out, "Ernie, stop playing around and just do it already!"

"Easy for you to say! You're not the one crawling through hell's toilet!"

"Hey! My bedroom is *not* a toilet!"

*Blech.* I'm not going to make it. Up ahead in the heart of the *Nightmare* grove I can see the shimmering form of a tape recorder. It's almost within arm's reach, but it may as well be a mile away. I can feel myself swirling in a maelstrom of magic and mischief, audible tentacles probing my every orifice trying to find their way inside me. If this were a *hentai*, I'd be at full mast and only feigning discomfort. But this isn't a *hentai*, it's real furking life, and it's happening right furking now. Jesus, can you get pregnant if you're already pregnant? "*Schrittfeuer!*"

Theo and Eva look at each other; Eva waves the flashlight at me.

"I'm talking to *you*, Goten!"

Theo frowns. "I still have no idea what's going on."

"*You…have the…power!*" With my last ounce of strength, I point at his crotch.

Then I face-plant the floor.

Giving up.

Giving in.

Waiting to be freed from this mortal coil—

Eva screams.

An unexpected whiff of the Santanas tickles my nostrils.

Angelic voices harmonize into a crescendo—

—I crack open one eye. Theo's gone full-frontal on us, hips thrust forward, a brilliant beam of light emanating from his crotch and cutting through the *Nightmare* grove like a knife through butter. It's the ending from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, only instead of the Ark of the Covenant nuking a bunch of naughty Germans, it's Theo's special area absolutely decimating everyone and everything in its wake.

*El Cassetto* stops playing.

The marsh evaporates.

I blink in the hot, hazy semi-darkness. Several of Eva's *Nightmare* dolls are smoldering. Eva herself looks like a firecracker went off in her face. She's fallen to her knees and is staring blindly at nothing, rivulets of drool, blood, and snot streaming from her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears.

Beside her, Theo's pulled his shorts back up and is hastily cinching the drawstring.

"Dude," I say. "Don't take this the wrong way, but there's something seriously wrong with your crotch." I shove Jack aside. There's *El Cassetto* looking worse for wear in its half-melted tape recorder. Quickly, I yank it out, cram it into my boombox (already tuned to KZZZ FM). "I am Erasor! All your iron oxide particles are belong to me!" I jab the record button, and watch the cassette spools rotate for a moment. "Huh. This isn't nearly as grandiose as I'd imagined."

Theo helps Eva to her feet. "Are you all right?"

She wobbles for a sec, but keeps her footing. She touches her face, her ears. "That...that light, the choir music—what just happened?"

"PTSD, sweets," I explain. "Theo's crotch is self-censoring, meaning you can't *see* it in the traditional sense. You just sort of have to *experience* it."

Theo starts to cut me off—

"But don't worry. The effects are only temporary." I hoist my boombox. "Check it out. *El Cassetto's* not so tough now that it's being erased with some dentist office-caliber Kenny G." I turn up the volume, but only for a sec, lest everyone's ears start bleeding for an entirely different reason—

A knock at the door, followed by what sounds like Eva's mom calling through: "*Is everything all right, Eva?"* The doorknob starts to turn.

Without missing a beat, Eva snaps her finger, nudges Theo in the side. "Phone —*now!*"

"Are you sure you're—?"

"Phone!"

"*Eva? Who are you talking to?"* The door swings open. Enter a flabbergasted Mrs. Taylor, who gasps and gawks at the total carnage, and who might very well have scolded us for breaking curfew and vandalizing private property.

But she's too late

Because Eva's already swiped us home.

# Sham

**@eva**

So, this is my night: smoldering bedroom, scorched eyeballs, ER, police tape, parents absolutely freaking out. They think I've been the unfortunate victim of a rogue ember attack—because that's what I told them. I don't know if it was the *right* thing to do, but as big of a deal as it's been, somehow it seems preferable to admitting the actual truth: that I'd staged an *El Cassetto* visitation using an old tape recorder and a pillow (I'm *not* pregnant, just to be clear), and during said visitation, my precocious little boyfriend had set fire to my room by exploiting the metaphysical properties of his penis. At the very least it's a coin toss.

(We really should talk about Theo's crotch. Something's definitely not right there. This is the Internet Age; I've seen my share of penises online. We've *all* seen our share of penises online. I'm no expert on the matter, but as far as I know, a guy's crotch is *not* supposed to shoot out beams of light that cause hysterical blindness and/or set bedrooms on fire. Right?)

Anyway, the doctors, buying my story about rogue embers, say I was lucky. Who knows what might've happened if I hadn't had my spray bottle on hand? After all is said and done, here I am back home at, like, an hour before dawn. Since my room's been cordoned off, I'm setting up on the living room sofa for a few hours' sleep—or whatever I can get at this point. My vision's mostly returned, and the bleeding's stopped. Once I've assured my parents that I'm all right, they leave me be. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, make a mental note to never let Ernie live last night down—

"Hey, Bug Eyes, I—"

Speak of the Devil— "*What have I told you about downloading without asking first?*" I blurt, jolting upright.

It's still pretty dark, and I can't really see Ernie all that well, but I'm certain he's gawking open-mouthed at my suddenly-flat tummy. "Holy crap! Did you miscarry?"

"*Shh!* Keep your voice down! You've already gotten me in enough trouble."

Ernie waits. Stares.

"For crying out—I didn't miscarry, Ernie. I was never pregnant—"

"But...but *El Cassetto*—"

"—just like *you're* not pregnant, dumbass."

Ernie turns livid.

Me, too.

Both of us jab our fingers at each other simultaneously, though Ernie gets it out first: "I *thought* it was weird that you woke up so soon after hearing *El Cassetto* when anyone else would've slept through till morning! You faked the whole thing!"

"I had to! You were obsessed with that stupid tabloid article! I had to show you how ridiculous you were being!"

"So, that's what I am to you? A ridiculous prop in your wicked play?"

Oh, bug eyes of death *so* activated!

But Ernie will have none of it. "Oh, no—don't you go scowling and tilting your head forward and nosebleeding at me like some kind of Millie Vanilli Downtown Bobby Brown!"

"Who?"

"The chick who played Eleven in *Stranger Things*!"

"You mean *Millie Bobby Brown*?"

"Don't change the subject!

"Don't butcher people's names!"

I think Ernie's flicking me off. "I can't believe this! Everything that's happened in recent times has been a sham! All of it!"

"Not *all* of it."

"*Puleaze!* What part of last night wasn't a complete and total poop-fart?"

"Maybe the part about me worrying about you so much that I actually staged an *El Cassetto* erasing, for one."

"Fat lot of good *that's* done for you." Ernie sits beside me on the sofa. That's when I notice he's got a grocery bag with him.

I know, curiosity and the cat and all, but... "What's in the bag?"

"Baby food and multivitamins," Ernie replies. "I figured I'd bring you a care package. The joke's on me."

So, that was my night.

How was yours?

## The Mystery of the Bloody Shower Head

**@theo**

Okay, can somebody *please* tell me what that was all about? Ernie in warpaint crawling on the floor of Eva's bedroom? Mexican *banda* music? Eva whispering into my ear, "It's fake—just play along" while pressing my hand against the obvious pillow strapped to her stomach? My crotch, uh...doing what it did during a moment of panic in a crisis situation? More importantly, why in the *world* did I think it was a good idea to expose myself in the first place?

I need a shower. I'm not sweaty or dirty or grimy or anything, but I *do* feel the need to figuratively wash away the events of the evening. Grabbing my phone and a fresh pair of shorts, I head down the hall and into the bathroom. I close the door behind me, prop my phone on the vanity for light, and undress. Then I step into the shower. Despite it being past late-night power hour, the touchscreen's lit up and ready to go. I guess utilities aren't subject to the rolling power-ons, so there's that. I wave my hand in front of the sensor; the screen flashes a message:

**—Sneekycam—**
**Software update required.**
**Please tap [Agree] to continue.**

Really? First we need updates for our computers, then our phones and cars and video game consoles, and now our shower heads? "You are *ruining* this!" says an imagined Dennis Reynolds from that episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* where he's trying to pimp himself out to older ladies at that country club, and the gang just won't leave him alone.

I tap the agree button, stand waiting as a progress bar flashes on the screen. It "only" takes a minute, but I'm reminded of days where I want to spend my lunchtime power hour playing a video game, however it's been long enough since my last gaming session that a handful of accumulated updates need to be installed, both for the game and the operating system. By the time everything's done, I've basically spent my lunch hour installing updates and not actually *playing* any games. Is that how it's eventually going to be when it comes to bathing? I try to shower quickly between breakfast and school in the morning, but because updates have to install I end up skipping the shower entirely—only to repeat the process the next morning, and the morning after that, and so on into infinity?

At last the touchscreen wakes with another message, this one accompanied by a

vaguely familiar-sounding male voice: "*Thanks for updating your shower head, bruh. Let's do this.*"

Huh. This must be Sneekycam's version of Alexa or Siri—though I'm not sure I like voice AI chatting with me while I'm washing myself. But the water comes on, and I tap a few times on the hot button, the cold, the hot once more until the temperature is just right. I shampoo my hair, rinse, start working my way down south when suddenly the voice feature activates again.

"*Hey, little buddy—*"

"*Hunh?*" I gasp, freezing in place, crotchfire suddenly blazing—

"*—think your mom's in the mood for a rinse-off—oh, my God!*"

I topple sideways out of the shower and onto the floor, taking the curtain with me as a makeshift cloak. After a moment's wrestling myself onto all fours, I go very still and stare at the shower head, which has lost its pressure, and which is now drooling...blood? I can also hear coughing, heavy breathing, the sound of a microphone being handled, and something like, "*Jesus...looked right at it...God almighty...so bright...my freaking eyes—*"

Crud.

I think someone's hacked my Sneekycam.

## Who Watches the Washers?

**@theo**

Ten minutes later:

"I'm just going to put it out there," Mini says, standing on the soap holder and holding up my cell phone for light, "that three dudes standing together in a shower is questionable at best."

I glower at him. "More questionable than a talking plush doll?"

"Hey, I'm not *questionable*, I'm just living in the wrong century. A hundred years from now when various states of perceptive flux are better understood, everyone will look back and laugh at our present-day selves being so uptight about expressing our subconscious via the plushness."

Whatever that means. I shift my attention back to Beta, who's scratching his chin thoughtfully while considering my Sneekycam's touchscreen. (Lately he's been relegated to hibernating during the rolling power-ons, but in emergencies where, oh, I don't know, the shower starts talking and *bleeding*, I can use a combination of battery backup and my phone's wireless hotspot to make him actual. Until my phone dies, that is.)

"It said what again?" he asks after a while.

"It told me to ask my mom if she wanted to shower," I reply. "There was some heavy breathing, and then a sound like a webcam mic being jostled or something. Then it started bleeding profusely."

"It started *bleeding*?"

"Um...yeah."

Mini elaborates—much to my chagrin: "Theo's got this thing. Whenever people see his schlong, they kind of go *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on him. Only now it looks like it's happening to inanimate objects, too."

Beta laughs. "You've got some imagination, little dude. Want me to take a look at it?"

My jaw drops. "*What?*"

"The *shower head*," he clarifies.

"Oh, yeah. Sure." I knew that.

Awkward pause.

Me looking at Mini.

Mini looking at me.

The two of us looking at Beta—

—who rolls his eyes, faces the touchscreen again. "Getting on with our lives..."

He pops off the panel and starts poking around inside. “Huh.”

“Huh what?” I ask.

Handing me the panel, he reaches up and unscrews the shower head, carries it over to the vanity, motions for me to follow. “Shine the light over here.”

I grab Mini and my phone and step beside Beta.

“Yep,” he says after a moment. “This Sneekycam setup of yours? It’s nothing but a webcam and microphone stuffed into a pseudo-erotic shower head. There’s also a Taurus chip inside the touchscreen panel, meaning I’m ninety-nine-percent sure this thing’s running SuperMegaNet. And there’s only one reason you run SuperMegaNet: because you want to upload or download.”

Now, the hopelessly naïve portion of my brain wants to be like, “Duh! SuperMegaNet’s built in for 911 purposes—firefighters or paramedics needing to download the moment a rogue ember is spotted.” But the Knows-Better portion, well, knows better. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but this isn’t just sheen monitoring, then. It’s *surveillance*.”

“And possibly voyeurism,” Mini adds.

*Yuck.* I turn to Beta. “So…what now?”

He shrugs, holds up the shower head. “Want to see who’s on the other end?”

# Masturbatorium

**@theo**

I should've told Beta no thanks, should've gone straight to Mom and tattled on the shower head like a good little boy. Instead, here we are downloading into a small, windowless, dimly-lit office in the middle of the night. Fidgeting up a storm, I turn in place, spot a water cooler and dying potted plant pushed up against one wood-paneled wall, a couple of file cabinets against another. That's not the interesting part, though. No, what immediately catches my attention front and center is that instead of a desk and some chairs, as one might expect to find in an otherwise normal office, there's an overstuffed recliner set in the middle of the room, and it's aimed at the far wall, which is covered floor to ceiling with various flatscreen computer monitors of various size, make, and model.

I step beside the recliner (note the blood splatter on the armrests). There's a small end table on one side, a wastebasket on the other. On the table: an economy size bottle of hand lotion, a box of Kleenex, a remote control.

"What the heck is this place?" I ask.

Beta's standing over by the monitors, and is examining a desktop PC that's been placed off to the side. "It looks like a lounge of some kind."

I pick up the remote, aim it at the monitor wall. I press the power button—

—and holy crap.

The two-dozen screens wake simultaneously, each one showing what looks like security camera footage of various people, male and female, naked in their bathrooms, bathing, showering, shaving, plucking, having sex or masturbating, eating bowls of cereal, texting (or, in the case of the Nakers, live-streaming) on their phones.

I look at Beta.

Beta looks at me.

We both look at the recliner, the hand lotion, the box of Kleenex, the wastebasket—

"Dude," Beta says solemnly. "I know what this is."

I swallow hard. "What?"

"This is literally a wank bank..."

One of the guys having sex uses a raunchy string of expletives to inform his gal as to the desirable state of her buttocks.

"...and these are people's Sneekycam feeds..."

A curvy college girl drops the soap in the shower, bends over to pick it up.

"...someone's spying on the entire city's naked comings and goings."

A petite brunette farts loudly while rinsing her hair.

"Who would do a thing like this?" I ask. "And how did they hack the city's sheen monitoring system?"

"*We* hacked into the system," Beta replies. "The password was '12345.'" He walks over to the door, opens it a crack, does a double-take. "Whoa. Check it out, little dude." He opens the door the rest of the way.

I follow him out of the room, and it becomes immediately obvious that we've actually downloaded into the back office of some kind of enormous factory warehouse, with automated machinery and conveyor belts and pipes and cables (besides Beta and myself, there's no one else here)—and a giant, steaming vat in the center of it all. The whole place reeks of grease and chemicals.

"It smells like a mechanic's shop," I murmur.

"I'd say it's more like Sterno," Beta says, and goes over to one of the conveyor belts, which is lazily transporting retro-looking boomboxes. He grabs one off the line, holds it up for emphasis. "Long live the eighties."

Another belt is churning out cassette tapes. Not factory-fresh ones ready for eventual sale to the last five people on Earth who still buy them, but old, scuffed ones with faded ink staining peeling labels.

The vat burps loudly.

I ask, "What do you think's in there?"

Beta shrugs. "There's only one way to find out."

I nod in agreement.

But neither of us budges.

"You go first."

"No, you."

"We'll *both* go."

There's a catwalk beside the vat. It's maybe ten feet to the lip. I follow Beta up the stairs. Gripping the handrail firmly, I peer into the vat, slow-churning a viscous, blue fluid that looks like—

"'Rogue ember fuel,'" Beta says, reading off the nearby sign. "'Warning: extremely flammable. Gargoyles only past this point.'"

A memory flickers in my head, something about a gargoyle blowing fire bubbles atop a neighbor's rooftop, and I let go of the handrail, wipe my hand on my shorts. "I've seen enough."

"Ditto."

We hurry back to the office, closing the door behind us. Beta goes for the remote control, and is trying to bring up the SuperMegaNet app when the air shimmers over by the recliner—

—and Dude Coolson, as in the *mayor* of San Angelico, downloads into the room. His head's bandaged haphazardly, his eye sockets are scorched and bloodshot; he's fumbling street tacos, a bottle of Tylenol, and some Jack Daniels while shouldering his phone to his ear. "Yeah, Moto, I accidentally saw some kid's wiener in the shower, and had to make a pharmacy run, but it's all good now..." He

trails off when he sees us.

Beta frowns.

I just wave sheepishly.

Coolson narrows his eyes. “Let me call you back. It looks like I’ve got some... unexpected guests.”

## Sole Proprietor

**@theo**

Coolson ends the call. "What the hell are you doing in my..." His eyes dart quickly to the recliner, the voyeur wall. "...office?" He squints at me. "Holy hell—you're the kid with the crotch!" Following a grossly obvious (and somewhat fearful) leer at my lower half: "I mean, er, who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my..." Another glance at the recliner, the wall. "...office?"

I start to hem and haw—

"What're *you* doing here?" Beta shoots back.

Coolson looks thoughtful for a sec. Behind, the voyeur wall frames him against a damning patchwork of bare flesh. "Overtime."

Normally, this is just about when Mini would tumble out of my shorts and call out Coolson on my behalf. But Mini wasn't the one caught in the shower, *I* was. And it friggin' bothers me enough that I don't need a plush doll to express myself. "You were watching me in the shower." I wave my hand at the voyeur wall. "You're watching *all* these people.

A tiny bead of sweat trickles down Coolson's forehead; his combover has become matted. "It's not what you think."

"So, you're *not* watching Sneekycam footage of unsuspecting naked people?"

"What?" Coolson laughs nervously. "Of course not. I was, you know... monitoring the feeds, checking for sheens, rogue embers—anything untoward."

Beta's unconvinced. "You. Mayor of San Angelico, monitoring the entire city all by yourself?"

Coolson is now sweating profusely. "Budget cuts, bro."

"But still enough in the bank for hand lotion and Kleenex."

"Hey, dry skin. Seasonal allergies. Effing Santanas, am I right?"

"Ah, I see. And the giant vat of 'rogue ember fuel' out there?"

I'm actually kind of curious what half-assed BS answer Coolson's going to come up with next, but instead he just sighs and stares me straight in the eye. "Look, kid. I've got a splitting headache thanks to you. What do you want from me?"

I clench my fists and stomp my foot on the floor. "I want to know why you were spying on me in the shower!"

"Hey, that was an accident—your mom was the one I was going for. If anything, *you* owe *me* an explanation. I mean, Jesus, kid, what's the deal with your cash and prizes anyway? Is that like an Instagram filter or something?"

"Just...answer my question, *please*."

Coolson suddenly relaxes. Smiles. "Fine. You want answers? Turn around."

I glance over my shoulder—and go wide-eyed when I realize someone's downloaded into the office while we were talking, someone who can't possibly be here, someone who *shouldn't* be here—

—Mr. Megalomoto.

Rocking his *rokushaku*.

And wielding a samurai sword.

He nods briefly at me, then says to Beta, "We meet again, Mr. Wong!"

"We meet again, Hikaru," Beta replies, doing his best cool, calm, and collected impression—even though I can tell he's totally as WTF as I am.

"Mr. Megalomoto?" I ask. "What's going on?"

"It seems, young Master Ivanovich, that you've stumbled upon our little secret."

# The El Cassetto Agenda

**@theo**

"Took you long enough, Moto," Coolson groans. He dumps his crap onto the recliner and stands beside Megalomoto, loosening his tie (apparently mayors aren't subject to the Boho Mandate—or else Coolson likes to moonlight in a suit and tie after hours). "These two were giving me the third degree."

At Megalomoto's prompting, Beta joins me at my side.

"You two know each other?" I ask Beta.

"Indeed, we do!" Megalomoto booms. "Isn't that right, Mr. Wong?"

"Taurus Labs has an exclusive contract with Megalomoto Industries," Beta explains. "We did software, they did hardware. Tell me, are you still charging those outrageous licensing fees in the name of *progress*?"

Megalomoto shakes his head. "Same old Simon, I see! All mathematics and lines of code, but alas no business sense!"

"I'm more a fan of common sense."

"Without business sense, my boy, there is no common sense! Where do you think the money comes from to pay for Taurus Labs' facilities? Equipment? Staff?"

"Nice to know SuperMegaNet is still just a cash-grab to you," Beta says.

"Yes, yes. The big evil corporation providing jobs and resources versus the righteous programmer with lofty goals of freedom and fairness. We've been here before!"

Beta folds his arms. "How'd you recognize me? I wasn't skinned back in the days when I was still actual."

"Come now, Mr. Wong! Even Bigfoot is spotted from time to time. Or did you think you were totally off the grid?"

I raise my hand. "Um, excuse me, but you still haven't explained your secret."

Megalomoto nods at Coolson. "No point leaving the boy hanging at this juncture."

Coolson walks over to one of the file cabinets, takes out a sombrero and puts it on. Then he faces us, spreads his arms. "I'm *El Cassetto*."

I don't believe it. "*What?*" No way. "*How?*" This can't be...*no way!* "*Why?*"

"It's all about the status quo. People need jobs, the economy needs a rewrite, the city is long overdue for an infrastructure upgrade. Do you really think we're going to accomplish any of that through taxes? Efficient budgeting? Political reform? Hell no." Coolson walks over to the recliner, takes a seat, crosses one leg over the other, clasps his hands all supervillain style. "San Angelico needs tens of

thousands of employees, utility workers, builders, and so forth in order to function. That may sound like a lot, but think about it. In a city with *millions* of residents, only tens of *thousands* are actually necessary. Where do the jobs come from for the rest of the unwashed masses? There's the private sector, military, good old-fashioned capitalism, but it's never enough. We always need more jobs. So, I create them. I give the citizens of San Angelico something to *do*. *El Cassetto*? Bam—government welfare and unplanned parenthood programs, major advancements in the field of binaural *banda* technology. The Santanas? Federal disaster grants. DOSVID-19 and the Boho Mandate? A goddamned *boon* to the swimwear and spray bottle industries. Newdcoin? Decentralized tax revenue stream. All of this creates jobs, stimulates the economy, and you can thank this dong right here." He points at his lap.

I kind of want to barf.

"Hey, don't look all-butt-hurt, kid. I do what I do for crotch and country, and I'm not naïve enough to believe I can't have a little fun along the way. The real question is, what do we do now that you know our dirty little secret?"

Megalomoto, sword still aimed at me and Beta, says to me, "This *is* a problem, Master Ivanovich."

I swallow, trying to think of what the people in movies or TV shows do when a deranged corporate CEO waves a samurai sword at them. "It doesn't have to be. I can keep a secret. And so can Beta."

"Bull," Coolson grunts. "You can keep this a secret like I can fit a pineapple up my ass. How dumb do you think I look?" He says this confidently, but if you watch closely, at the very end, he quickly deadpans an imaginary camera—as if he knows how full of crap he is, and is worried someone else might call him on it.

"What, then?" asks Beta defiantly. "Are you going to kill us?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"No, no," Megalomoto says. "No killing. Too messy. Perhaps...a trade?" He smiles at Beta, who suddenly looks a lot less defiant. "I get the elusive Mr. Wong, and young Master Ivanovich gets to resume his life without police intervention."

"No way," I begin—

"I'd think twice before declining. The hacking of city-owned equipment, trespassing, not to mention you've been collaborating with a known fugitive... there's a lot of unwanted attention there."

Crap.

Megalomoto nods at me. "A fine, upstanding young man such as yourself with so much to lose, it would break your mother's pretty little heart to find out what her son's been up to lately. And you, Simon." He moves over to Beta. "Spending twenty hours a day on pause due to the rolling power-ons... Work for me on a proprietary SuperMegaNet fork, and you'll have power twenty-four-seven. You'll be the first to avail yourself of the persistent skinning feature, once it's ready. You'll be taken care of for a long and fruitful life. That's more than you could ever hope for the way things are going now, and a damned sight better than what the government or human rights groups would offer if they got their hands on you."

Beta's nibbling his lip.

"Come now. You were never going to live forever on a pile of hard drives in some kid's bedroom, were you?"

"Take the offer, butt-wad," Coolson calls out from the recliner. "I feel a boner coming on, and I sure as hell don't want to waste it bagging your little boyfriend's bruised and bloodied carcass—"

"Mr. Coolson, *please*," Megalomoto says, cutting him off with a practiced wave of his blade. "Allow Mr. Wong to make his decision."

Coolson scoffs, accidentally knocks his lotion bottle onto the floor.

I look at Beta.

"He's right, little dude," he says after a moment. "I chose to take the risk when I went rogue, but I can't ask you to make the same sacrifice. This is between me and Megalomoto Industries." He faces Megalomoto. "I'll go with you."

"Beta, no—" I start to say.

Surprisingly, he turns to me, gives me a hug—our first ever honest hug—and whispers quickly into my ear, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer."

I hear the words, but I'm not listening. This is all too much, and it's happening too quickly. I want to think of a way out, but nothing's coming—and so I simply break free from Beta's embrace and run for the door, yanking it open, dashing into the heart of the factory.

"Hey, get back here!" Coolson shouts.

I don't look back, don't look forward, either. I'm just running on adrenaline, trying to get out, to get *somewhere*. I dart left, right, under a robotic arm, over a conveyor belt, up some stairs—crap, I'm on the rogue ember fuel vat catwalk, and there's only one set of stairs.

Yeah, I didn't think this through.

Coolson's kept up. He clamors onto the catwalk. Braces himself against the handrails, takes a couple of deep breaths. "Jesus Christ...where did you learn to... parkour like—never mind. End of the...line...let's go." He lunges for me—but I'm small and quick and still surging. I drop into a crouch, planning to crawl between his legs and then make my escape back down the stairs. However, what actually happens is this: the moment I drop, he catches on, and fumbles his choice between bringing his legs together and moving them out of the way. This means that for a brief moment, he's actually standing on one leg, and that's when I accidentally collide with him. I scrunch my eyes shut and freeze up, fully expecting Coolson to kick me in the face or grab me by the hair and haul me to my feet. Instead, I hear, "Crap!" followed by the handrail shuddering and, a moment later, a nearby splash.

I open my eyes.

Dude Coolson's fallen into the vat.

Crawling to the edge of the catwalk, I peer down inside.

Coolson surfaces, coughs and sputters. It's not like in the movies, though; he doesn't dissolve or mutate into a freak or anything. He's just soaked in ember goo. He swims to the edge, tosses his arms over the lip for support, spits out a viscous wad of blue gel. Glaring at me, he yells, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

I wish I knew.

## If Only

**@theo**

Megalomoto makes good on his word, downloading me back home—downloading *with* me back home. When he notices my questioning look, he stoops and whispers into my ear, "Sleep well, Master Ivanovich. Change is coming." He pats me on the head and leaves—not via SuperMegaNet, but through the bedroom door.

I can hear him walking down the hall.

And into my mother's room.

I squint through the semi-darkness, trying to make out the shape of my desk, my bed, but everything's miles away. So, I just stand motionless and empty-hearted.

Wishing I had a time machine.

That I might go back and warn my previous self to skip the late-night shower that ended my world.

## Bonus Track

**@shakabrah**

**/dev/null:** smn://3OS.24.I3.107/
**/dev/null:** allweneedtobeisheretoday
**/dev/null:** liberate the code

# Collision

**@jan**

*Many moons later...*
*(Actually just a month, but "many moons" sounds way cooler)*

I don't realize I'm looking for an excuse to get back in touch with the Runt Squad until I suddenly and unexpectedly have an excuse to get back in touch with the Runt Squad.

It happens at Spendco on a Saturday afternoon during lunchtime power hour. There I am, rounding a corny boho-themed smoothie end display and turning into the health drink aisle; there's Eva, turning *out* of the health drink aisle; there's *both* of us slamming into each other like complete and total Klauses, my cold cuts flying over her shoulder, her bottle of ginger-lemongrass tea punching me square in the gut.

"Hey, watch it..." Eva begins, but trails off when she sees it's me. "Oh. Hi, Jan."

"Hey, Eva," I reply.

We wave to each other (even though we're only standing two feet apart).

"It's good to see you," I say, noticing that her eyes are slightly smaller and her chest slightly bigger.

"It's good to be seen," she says, checking out my designer Speedo.

(In the month since SuperMegaNet's persistent skinning feature went live, everyone has gone custom-skinned. Well, not *everyone*. A lot of parents, purists, and people over forty are staying default, both actual and virtual. I'm default. Not like that Edna Forthright activist who goes on all the talk shows to warn against loss of traditional identity due to excessive skinning. I've just always been content in my own skin, merely augmented—thank you, Beta—to make up for my missing bytes. The only thing I've done is make my skin persistent. Yep: no more pixel monster whenever I'm away from good Wi-Fi. But you have the app, you know how it all works. And unless you've been living under a rock, you know about the skins versus defaults debate, celebrities suing for unlicensed use of their likenesses, retirees skinning younger and losing social security benefits, kids skinning older and getting busted for buying alcohol, Olympic athletes skinning better, stronger, faster—you already know all that.)

"So...what've you been up to?" Eva asks after an appropriately awkward pause.

I point at the cold cuts on the floor. "Shopping for my parents."

"How're they doing?"

"They're somewhere around the world, I guess." I crouch to pick up the cold cuts. Straighten again. "It's kind of like having my own apartment." When Uncle Martin isn't hanging around trying to sell me on his latest unrequited business opportunities.

Eva frowns, but doesn't say anything. If we hadn't stopped talking this past month, she'd probably get into it with me about my parents basically abandoning me since they stole my computer and became SMN addicts. As it is, we just share another awkward pause, shifting from foot to foot, smiling cheerfully while keeping our gazes averted. The last time we saw each other, Eva was getting me banned from Thrill-Kill's crypto-dungeon. I'd hated her guts for it. Now...not so much.

She gives it another moment before finally making eye contact again as she starts to turn away. "Well, I should be going—"

"We should hang together," I suggest.

Eva stops, faces me tentatively. Calls my bluff. "Yeah, we should."

"Like, all of us."

"Where and when?"

I call her bluff back: "3 Hags' Doughnuts. Lunchtime tomorrow."

She shrugs. Nods. "I have some stuff to do, but I think I can make it. Do you want to hit up the others, or should I?"

And just like that, I have my excuse.

# The Legacy

**@eva**

"Ernie, you look ridiculous," I say to the musclebound barbarian berserker who's just uploaded to our usual table outside 3 Hags' Doughnuts—still virtual, as are pretty much all local businesses these days. (Neither he nor any of us acknowledges the XP ticker inexplicably counting off above his head.)

"If by ridiculous you mean *epic*," Ernie replies, adjusting Theo's Best Tail award, which, God knows why, hangs from his massive neck, "then thank you. Also, you shall heretofore address me as Myron Deathkill, esquire."

Beside me, Theo snickers, rolls his eyes. "Whatever, Byron Deathkilt."

"Myron Deathkill."

"Right. Miriam Killbill."

"*Myron Deathkill.*"

"At least I'm default, gas giant."

"That just makes it even weirder! I know I'm only *cosplaying* a rad-ass *Hella* warrior. You're *living* as a Shakaist!"

"Ernie—"

"Myron! Esquire!"

"Okay, I'm *not* calling you any of that."

"Then you'll die by my hand!"

Jan takes a bite of his mint-chip cannoli, shoots me an amused look. Ernie's definitely in the minority, as he's the only one of us who's gone fully-skinned. Okay, so Jan's wearing designer jeans and a stylish tank (we're virtual, so the Boho Mandate doesn't apply), though he very well may have bought rather than installed them. And I guess I touched up my boobs and eyes just a tad (if anyone asks, puberty). But other than that, we're pretty default. Oh, I'd messed around with my skin the day persistent skinning went live. I'd given myself dreamy Disney eyes, full rack, flares, curves galore. Then, standing in front of the mirror, I'd realized how totally creepy I looked as a voluptuous thirteen-year-old, and had increased my skin's age to eighteen. *Then* I'd realized my parents would never let me set foot out of the house as a girl inside a woman's body. In the end, I'd filed away my babelicious skin and made do with basic augmentation.

I don't know. Maybe Theo got inside my head. Way back when virtual skinning was the new thing he mentioned how he'd had a similar experience trying on all these different skins and eventually just staying default whenever he uploaded anywhere. Skinning seems like this amazing, revolutionary deal—until you can't

decide who you want to be, and you can't decide *why* you want to be them. You certainly have no clue how to explain yourself to anyone who asks. That's what bothers me the most: I don't know how to explain why my default skin isn't good enough. Shouldn't it be?

I can only imagine how Ernie explains Myron Deathkill to his grandparents. Hopefully better than he did to Principal Sandalwood that day he'd uploaded to class in full-on barbarian mode. I'd happened to be running an attendance sheet down the main hall (don't ask me why we still use printed attendance sheets when Boca Linda is virtual anyway), and had spotted Myron's hulking physique sitting stuffed into a chair outside the principal's office.

Principal Sandalwood himself, arms folded, one foot tapping nervously against the floor, his combover a third of the way to becoming *un*combed, had stood over him with a flustered look on his face suggesting he'd been dealing with disruptive skinners all morning. "Mr. Goodale, now, what is all this? What do you think you're doing?"

Myron had stood up at that point, his bulging thighs taking the chair with them. "Standing up for my socio-technological rights!"

The very next day, Boca Linda had enacted a strict no-skinning policy on its SuperMegaNet server.

At lunchtime, I'd asked a pouting, despondent, and notably *default* Ernie, "So, how's it feel that this is your legacy? To be the kid who got skinning banned from school? How's it *feel*, Myron Deathkill?"

Ernie's reply had been of the middle-fingered variety.

## Pokechu

**@ernie**

I do *not* look ridiculous.

Everyone's dumping on me for going whole hog with my *Hella* skin, but you know what? I couldn't give less of a crap if I were constipated. I'm *done* with the Boho Mandate. If San Angelico's powers-that-be are going to insist on continued skimping while actual, I'd much rather wear Myron's skin rather than my own. And when virtual, you'd better believe I'm playing dress-up like a mofo each and every power hour. Anyway, Eves is one to talk. Look at her over there with her new nubs and eye job. Look at Janny Boy, with his...um...well, he's pretty much the same day-old bread he's always been. Junior, though, still prancing around in his boho threads without a care in the world... Tell me, when did he become pro-Mandate? Let me guess—he had a cheesy Hollywood superhero origin moment:

> The boy in the mirror stands staring back at me in the candlelight, blinking, unblinking, one leg extended forward as if he's about to step through a portal connecting his world and mine. He's small for his age, but sturdy. Modestly clad in shorts and flip-flops, he checks to make sure his smartphone and wallet are tucked inside his pockets, secures the plush puppet slung against his hip, hefts his messenger bag to confirm the weight of his laptop and travel chargers, adjusts his fruity rainbow choker and various bracelets and anklets. Tousles his windswept hair, his bright yellow Dragon Ball earring.
>
> Boho Mandate or not, he should look and feel ridiculous in that getup. Instead, there's a glint in his eye, a bearing to his stance. This New Age caveboy, this modern-day warrior won't just survive, he's going to *thrive*. But to do that, he needs to be strong, confident, self-assured—the exact opposite of his double watching him from this side of the mirror, the doppelgänger now awakening something within, something about honesty and acceptance. Something he's been afraid to admit, either to himself or to anyone else: that the Boho Mandate, once an inconvenient, nay, *absurd* societal restriction, has now become his liberation. The rules of the game have changed—
>
> —so, *he's* changing.
>
> Out of his clothes, out of his past.

His manifestation not so much a *revolution* as an *evolution*.

Provocative, yet understated.

Actualized.

Realized.

A mouse no longer afraid to run among elephants.

An analog kid living in a digital world.

He is...

...Son of Distant Earth.

(Damn. I should do movie preview voice-overs.)

Simply put: the little bugger's a caricature of himself, and he's giving *me* the business about Myron Deathkill? Literally the definition of "hypocrite!"

"Holy bull," Jan says.

Theo's auto-correct kicks in despite a mouthful of gluten-free standard glaze: "I think you mean 'holy cow.'"

"Yeah, that. Mayor Coolson's a black guy."

Jan holds up his phone for us to see. There's some kind of press conference being live-streamed from city hall. Skimped and sheened out the wazoo, this big and tall dark chocolate dude takes the podium, while standing slightly behind him are Theo's new step-daddy (aka, Mr. Megalomoto), the ever-present Fire Commissioner Faustman, and those various other miscellaneous cohorts you always see in the background whenever anyone political gives a speech.

The black dude acknowledges the camera with a peace sign.

"*What's up, my peeps. I am your one and only Mayor Dude Coolson. You'll notice that I'm now a black gentleman. For anyone who might question my identity preference, I want you to first ask yourself, what is a man? What is a woman? I'll tell you. Whatever the hell they want to be. The future is now. The future is mutable. My fellow Angelicans, we are mutable. That's something the crusty old fossils on Capitol Hill don't want you to know. That's why I come before you now wearing this proud, virile African visage. I am a man of the people and for the people. I believe this with all my heart and soul.*"

(Side note: the Dude looks like Terry Crews at his best and biggest, but still sounds like Will Arnett.)

"*But this isn't about me. It's about* we. *We the citizens of San Angelico have fought long and hard these past couple of years. We've waged war on rogue embers and the dosequisvirus and won. We've reinvigorated the swimwear sector, turning it*

*into a multi-billion-dollar industry overnight and becoming the largest exporter of bikinis the world over. Thanks in no small part to the Boho Mandate and Naker movement, we're now wearing fewer clothes than ever, which means we're washing fewer clothes than ever, which, in turn, means we're using less water and energy overall. This combined with rolling power-ons has resulted in our monthly utility bills being lower than anywhere else in the continental United States. You heard right: San Angelico is the most energy-efficient city in America. Vitamin D deficiency—America's silent killer—has been all but eradicated within our sprawling city limits.*

"*And it doesn't stop there. While the rest of the country—indeed, the rest of the world—is busy passing laws and enforcing regulations designed to limit your skinning and cryptocurrency rights, I'm expanding those rights. I'm enabling a mother. I'm empowering. Your body, your identity. Politics have no place in deciding your orientation, gender, life choices, religion, etcetera, etcetera. Pause for applause—damn. Read the quiet part out loud. Screw it—we're doing it live. You want to skin as a supermodel with an unstoppable rack? Do it. Want to be an NBA star without the pointless training and competition? Hell yeah. Want to be a bloated yellow Pokechu who shoots laser beams out of his butt? Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't. Lose twenty pounds? Gain twenty pounds? Turn back the clock? Beautiful, fit, voluptuous, forever young? San Angelico is the land of golden opportunity. Newdcoin is that opportunity. That's why I'm announcing the immediate conversion of all actual public school campuses into state-of-the-art Newdcoin mining farms. Thanks to SuperMegaNet, virtual work and learning are the future, thereby rendering the antiquated convention of physical school and office buildings obsolete. Think of the energy savings of not having to heat, cool, and maintain the city's offices and school campuses. Imagine a world where it's just the opposite: these same buildings that until recently leeched resources and taxpayer dollars will now churn out cryptocurrency, thus stimulating the economy. Think of rush hour traffic becoming a thing of the past. I don't know about you, but I'm sporting mental wood right now.*

"*We went into the dosequisvirus epidemic on the brink of bankruptcy. We've emerged with a new economy, a new identity—a new lease on life. None of it would be possible without each and every one of you doing your part day in and day out. Go boho, save lives! You will wear nothing and be happy! You will wear nothing and be strong! The people of San Angelico are a force to be reckoned with! Our* kung fu *is superior to all other fu! #SheenLife forever!*"

Coolson makes like he's going to do a mic-drop, but when detaching the microphone from the podium proves too cumbersome, he covers with one more "#SheenLife forever!" and waves Fire Commissioner Faustman over.

"*Now here's our esteemed fire commissioner, Nathaniel Faustman, with this week's numbers.*"

Faustman trots up to the podium, adjusts his glasses, smiles creepily into the camera. Why he's still skinned as his wrinkled, liver-spotted, hundred-year-old default self, I have no clue.

"*Thank you, Mayor Coolson. Good afternoon, everyone. Please excuse my cloven hooves. They're the result of a childhood accident...*"

Jan instinctively puts his phone away (as, I imagine, most teenagers do whenever Commissioner Faustman starts talking).

We look at each other.

Theo asks the obvious: "What the heck is a *Pokechu*?"

# Take-Home Box

**@theo**

For the record, Ernie *totally* looks ridiculous. Like, my dad with Big Bod and Big Dong ridiculous. It's hard to tell if he's really, truly proud of being a six-foot-tall *Hella War* barbarian character, or if it's some kind of subtle social commentary on trendy Angelicans' looking as outrageous actually as they do virtually. Ernie's fat and obnoxious, but he can also be profound, too. When he wants to be. When he thinks no one's looking—oh, *wow*.

Did I just refer to Ernie as *profound*?

We eat our doughnuts. Crack our jokes. Criticize various pop culture figures. Pose sloppily for Eva's camera. Dodge the usual wet willies and carefully-timed farts proffered by Mr. Deathkill. And for a brief while I forget to worry about the things I'm supposed to be worrying about: Beta and Dad moving out; Mr. Megalomoto moving *in*; Eva and I going steady; spray bottles, Sneekycams, rolling power-ons. When Eva announces it's group photo time, I let her tuck against me as Jan and Ernie crowd in behind (Mini bobs cheerfully between my legs, evidently listening to a playlist only he can hear). I smile at myself in the camera's viewfinder. I look like I'm growing up on the set of *Baywatch*. Too cute, too sweet to exist without some kind of Hollywood-style ironic twist lurking just around the corner.

"I need to get a take-home box," Ernie announces once Eva's camera has had its way with us.

"You need a to-go box for *that*?" Eva nods at Ernie's half-eaten éclair.

"No, I need a *take-home* box."

I clarify: "What he means is, he wants a dozen doughnuts for the road."

Jan shakes his head indifferently. "Imagine how many starving kids we could feed donating all those calories to charity."

"One, gobble my knob," Ernie replies. "Two, speaking of charity..." He faces me. "Spot me a take-home box, bruh."

"Why don't you spot yourself?"

"I forgot my wallet in my other loincloth."

"Ernie, I'm not just going to buy you a dozen doughnuts."

Ernie leans forward, Best Tail award dragging loudly across the tabletop. "You know, junior, you never used to be so stingy back before you became a Shakaist."

"What're you talking about? I've never bought you *anything*." Though that's not entirely true. Often I'll spring for lunch or doughnuts or (before DOSVID) movie tickets for the entire gang, Ernie included. I'm merely not in the habit of

buying for Ernie *specifically* because, well...he's kind of like a seagull. You feed him once, he'll expect you to feed him all the time. Also, he'll poop on your head.

"Damn straight you never buy me anything," Ernie grunts. "And don't you feel like crud for it?"

I smirk. "It's one of those things I'll have to learn to live with."

"Release this pain," Ernie urges solemnly, trying to take my hand. "Buy me a take-home box. You can write it off when you do your taxes."

"Um, that's not exactly how it works." I tuck my hands beneath the table. "Besides, I know you have at least ten dollars on you. I saw you counting a wad of singles earlier. You just want me to pay for a take-home box *now* so that you can come back and get another one on your own *later*."

"Fine. You know what?" Ernie straightens, reaches into his hip pouch, pulls out the aforementioned wad. Waves it menacingly at me. "I was saving up to get you a little something for your birthday next week, but due to budget cuts, you now get nothing."

"Ernie, my birthday was last week."

He raises an eyebrow. "Get out."

"Really."

"Your birthday was last week. *Really*."

"See, that's why I'm not buying you doughnuts."

"Because I'm calendar-challenged?"

"That's one of the reasons, yeah."

"You know, if anything, *you* should be buying *Theo* doughnuts," Jan suggests.

Ernie glares at him.

Glares at me.

Finally pushes his chair back and gets to his feet. "A single item from the day-old bin—that's *it*."

"For true?" I ask, clasping my hands together in mock-excitement.

"Shaddup and pick out your birthday doughnut."

# The Toppling of Muffin Mountain

**@theo**

Waiting in line inside 3 Hags', it occurs to me that I've never seen so many people comfortable in other people's skins. Literally, I'm surrounded by beautiful actor, supermodel, athlete, gaming and anime character deepfakers—as well as the obligatory Trump Is the New Orange memester (there's always one). A few people are default; even fewer are OG default, as in unaugmented. In fact, I may be the only one, if you don't count my special contacts. Maybe, also, the unspectacular college girl who doesn't look like anyone in particular, the one who's deadpanning her way from the napkin dispenser back to her table. She's probably default. But Tom Holland over by the toppings kiosk? You *know* that's not really him loading up his plate of Tubular Belles with spoonful after spoonful of peanut butter cup shreds. Or, at the front of the line, Selena Gomez ordering a Quadruple-Fudge Crappuccino alongside her friend (Crustina from *Fortnite*, I'm pretty sure) who's laughing *so* hard at each and every one of her wisecracks. Fakers all.

And then there's Ernie, standing beside me with crossed arms, one sandaled foot tapping impatiently against the virtual tilework. If everyone else on this server is compensating for something, Ernie's most definitely *over*-compensating.

"So," he grunts, glowering at those in his general vicinity. "Judging by the fact that Bug Eyes hasn't turned up with scorch marks recently, I'm guessing the two of you haven't done it yet."

"Done what?" I ask. I pretend not to notice that Soma Yukihira and Megumi Tadokoro, behind us, have suddenly turned our way.

"You know. *It*." Ernie pulls back his arms while thrusting his hips forward.

"None of your business, jerk."

"That means no."

"*That means none of your business.*"

Ernie scoffs. "'Wilted is the wang without a flower to pollinate.' Hemingway."

"Okay, I'm one-hundred-percent sure Hemingway never said that."

"Does it matter? As I live and breathe, there's an unrequited sausage slung between your legs with no purpose but to fill out your undies, and it's breaking my heart."

Oh, God—Soma and Megumi are now gawking, no doubt concerned that a grown barbarian warrior is talking to a kid about his wang. "Dude, what have I told you about potty-talking in public?"

Ernie tries to swat at my crotch, but I instinctively jerk my hips out of the way

so that he ends up slamming a meaty fist into the nearby muffin display instead. This creates a sudden, explosive spectacle involving an overturned table and projectile baked goods rocketing every which way. A large Blueberry Lemony Snicket knocks the phone out of a boho chick's hands during a peace-sign-and-fish-lips-selfie; a Boring Bran completely dislodges the glasses from a Harry Potter deepfaker's face, sends him clambering loudly into the women's restroom; a Clockwork Orange-Cranberry (fittingly) plops into the Orange Trump dude's cup of Java the Hott. He recoils for a second, surprised, then takes a sip, shoots Ernie a thumbs up.

Needless to say, all eyes in the shop are now on us.

Ernie's save is as follows: "That's right! These muffins are dry and uninspired!"

Something scratches my ankle. I look down in time to see a small tumbleweed scooting past.

Ernie sighs. "Ah, shiat." Rights the table. Drops to his knees and starts picking up muffins.

The XP ticker continues to count off above his head.

## Crotch Remembered

**@theo**

Pulling out my phone, I snap a pic of Myron Deathkill crawling around on the floor in all his glory. Then, what the heck, I drop to my knees as well and offer a hand picking up muffins. "Explain to me again why there's an XP counter above your head?"

Ernie blinks, swipes at the air above his mullet. "Wait—I've got an XP counter?"

"Yeah. It's been increasing steadily ever since you uploaded."

Ernie swipes some more. "Friggin' cheat codes!"

I don't even want to know.

"We haven't done it, by the way," I murmur several muffins later.

"What?" Ernie grunts.

"Me and Eva. When you asked me before...we haven't done anything except kiss and hold hands and stuff." I clear my throat. "That's it."

"Good for you," Ernie replies, and holds up a muffin, addresses a duo of nineties retroskinners (Bobby Hill and Joseph Gribble) who've just stepped up to the display. "Hey, Mowgli—do you think anybody will notice this one's got a cigarette butt in it?"

"Um, note the iconic green T-shirt and white shorts," Joseph replies, annoyed for no apparent reason. "I'm Joseph Gribble from *King of the Hill*."

*Okay.*

Bobby shakes his head. "Your nineties pop culture nostalgia *kung fu* leaves much to be desired, good sir!"

Scowling, Ernie says, "Joseph Gribble, Mowgli, Ma-Ti from *Captain Planet*—show me the difference, and I'll show you my—"

I cup a hand over Ernie's mouth. Smile sheepishly at Bobby and Joseph. "Gratitude. He was going to say *gratitude*."

**@theo**

Bobby and Joseph depart as the line moves forward.

I wave Soma and Megumi past. "Can I ask you something, Ernie?"

"Myron!"

"Do you think Eva and I are good together?"

"I'd say it's more like you have a lot of wasted potential, but if you want to call it 'good together,' be my guest."

Remember what I mentioned earlier about Ernie being profound when he wants to be? "I don't know. For the last month we've been dating, kissing, holding hands, taking selfies and stuff. I've finally got what I've always wanted, but sometimes I can't help feeling like it's all for show. Like Eva's dating me to placate Summer and her lackeys is the *only* reason she's dating me, and not just *one* of the reasons, you know?"

Ernie dusts a Gingersnoot against his shoulder. "Let me answer your question with another question. What do you get out of dating Bug Eyes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, no answering a question answering a question! Now, answer my question."

I shrug. "We...hang with you and Jan. We help each other with homework—"

Ernie rolls his eyes, impatient. "To answer my question, you two are dating. Eves gets to show off her geeky beau, but what do *you* get out of the deal that you weren't already getting before you started going steady?"

Ernie. Profound. So forth.

He rights the muffin table and starts piling muffins onto it. "That's right, junior. You're getting *nada*. You feel like you're still just friends with Eva because you *are*. You need to be more assertive, take it to the next level."

I narrow my eyes. "If this has to do with sex again—"

"Everything has to do with sex! Or weren't you paying attention to James Spader when he first interviewed for branch manager in *The Office*? Everything everyone ever does is for immediate and/or eventual muff. Planets, stars, *entire solar systems* rotate patiently over billions of years just for a shot at the Milky Way's giant, gaping hole—or do you think little ol' Theo Ivanovich is somehow better than the motherflipping *cosmos*?"

"Um...I don't...er...what?"

"A month of being polite and well-mannered and Eva's just about sick to death

of Vanilla Theo. You need to take the lead, transform into Cocoa Caliente Theo. Touch some nubs, grab some booty."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Then why has there not been a bountiful meeting of the crotches?"

...and just like that Ernie's profoundness dissipates with all the fanfare of an inconsequential fart. "Anyway, premarital sex recommendation aside, can we get back to the original topic?"

"We never left it."

"Now that I'm finally with Eva...how come I'm not happy?"

With stranger danger-like timing, some dude skinned as Mark Manson (and also wearing a "Mark Manson IRL" T-shirt) leans over from his table nearby and butts in: "You've given too many f*cks about the wrong thing, and now that you have it, you're realizing it's not what you expected. This is good, because once you're aware you've given too many f*cks about something, you can reallocate said f*cks to something or someone else more deserving." He hands me a bright orange hardcover copy of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*. Then he snaps his finger and disappears into a puff of smoke.

"Who the heck was that?" Ernie asks.

"Mark Manson IRL, apparently," I reply, and glance at the coffee and half-eaten cruller sitting abandoned on Mark's table.

For which no f*cks were given.

# Dusting Dolls

**@eva**

When you've only got power and Internet four hours per day, your parents are quick to find other things for you to do in the time between. Usually it's something homework, housecleaning, or (for me) wrestling-related. Since I don't have practice nor do conditioning on Sundays, and I've already finished all my homework, that leaves the dreaded cleaning option. It'd be enough to spoil my day except that Theo's volunteered to help out. His neat-freak half just can't turn down the opportunity to bring order and cleanliness to the world one bedroom at a time. Also, he hasn't been too keen on hanging around his mom's house these days if he can help it. Not since his dad moved out and Mr. Megalomoto moved in. Theo hasn't told me exactly what's going on except to say he hates Megalomoto, Megalomoto hates him, and for some reason Mrs. Ivanovich is over the moon for the guy. My parents have never broken up, so I can't really relate, but I *do* know if I were in Theo's flip-flops, I wouldn't want to be a homebody.

Anyway, long story short, me and Theo are supposed to be cleaning my room.

Instead, we're having a mack session, the two of us standing mostly obscured in my *Nightmare* grove, hidden away from my parents in plain sight (open bedroom door = wholesome teenagers behaving, right?)—

"Eva, dear? How's the cleaning coming along?"

*Ugh.* That's my mom calling out from the hallway and pretending to be all friendly-casual when really she's *totally* checking up on me. Ever since she found out Theo and I are dating, it's like she's developed some kind of sixth sense tuned specifically to the proximity of our mouths. We could be at a coffee house in Brussels, she here in San Angelico, and she'd still somehow happen to call or text right at the moment I decide to lean in for a harmless peck on the lips.

"I'm dusting my dolls!" I call back, and motion for Theo to make like he's doing just that.

Mom pokes her head into the room. Because we *have* cleaned up somewhat, and because what she can see of me and Theo between the entangled limbs of Jack Skellington and company *looks* like an accurate representation of two kids dusting, she merely nods and recedes back into the hallway. She says over her shoulder, "All right, then. Keep at it, you two."

I have to stifle a laugh.

Theo smiles crookedly. "*Dusting your dolls?*"

*Dust-dust, brush-brush.* "Hey, it's a thing—"

"—that totally sounds like some kind of euphemism."
"It's settled, then. 'Dusting dolls' shall forthwith be code for making out."
Giggling, we tilt our heads together and resume dusting my dolls.

# Barely Home

**@theo**

It's weird going home. It feels like Mom and I have moved without moving. Same house, new people. New rules. The camera crew, specifically, is off-putting. That was Dude Coolson's idea, all part of some kind of propaganda documentary pushing #SheenLife, skimping, boho living, as well as an excuse to keep an eye on me in case I renege on our gentleman's agreement. "We're a #SheenLife family now!" Megalomoto had declared when he (and by extension Coolson) had moved in. "Community pillars! We must keep up appearances, lead by example!" Said example being some kind of traditional old-school Asian values motif bolstering Megalomoto's alleged *family man* image. I know better, though. Me and Beta, we hacked the Sneekycam in the upstairs shower. I've been to the Masturbatorium. Rogue embers and dosequisvirus may have been a thing once before, but now we're simply going through the motions because no one's told us any different, and jerks like Coolson and Megalomoto are taking advantage of the situation to suit themselves.

Mom's clueless. She thinks that she's in love with Megalomoto, that he's been there for her during her split from Dad or whatever. They stay up all night together alternating between long bouts of conversation and even longer bouts of nookie. That's really all this is: Megalomoto gives my mom a shoulder to cry on, and in return she gives him, well, *way* more than a shoulder. Plus with Beta gone...

...yeah. Home hasn't felt like home for a while now.

All of this is going through my mind as I download from Eva's after our cleanup-slash-make-out session. It's the start of dinnertime power hour. I'm not really feeling like noms, though. My appetite tends to wane whenever I'm around the house. It's done wonders for my abs, but that's about all it's good for.

"You'd better get out there, kid," Mini suggests in an old-timey radio announcer voice as he crawls onto my desk from goodness-knows-where and switches on the lamp. "Everybody's expecting a show."

"Good for everybody," I reply. I sit at my desk, removing my messenger bag and slinging it across the back of the chair. I kick off my flip-flops, press my bare feet against the chill floorboards. "My plan is to hole up here inside my bedroom till late-night power hour."

Ever intuitive, Mini sighs and takes a seat facing me with his plush legs dangling over the desktop edge. "That would insinuate you don't feel comfortable roaming freely in your own house."

"Well, I don't."

"Maybe so. But there's no way you're giving Megalomoto or Coolson the satisfaction, right?"

I look Mini in the eye.

"This is *your* house," he says.

"Technically, Mom's name is on the mortgage—"

"You know what I mean."

Yeah.

"And you know what you have to do."

I nod.

Smile triumphantly.

Falter. "Um...what do I have to do?"

"Dude. Opposite George Costanza from season five, episode twenty-two of the immortal *Seinfeld* chronicles. Do the exact opposite of everything your gut tells you to do: have your dinner without social distancing, practice your yoga without bringing a spray bottle, give everyone an attitude and wear a full set of clothes while doing so."

I'm a Shakaist; the skimping doesn't bother me. And the spray bottles and social distancing? Already as forgotten as the Weeknd. But I get what Mini's suggesting. Megalomoolson can play their games? I'll partake, put on a show, play the part of an indifferent teenager—even though I absolutely *hate* the cliche.

I get to my feet. "Mini, why do I feel like I'm trading one pretense for another?"

"Desperate times, bruh," Mini replies. "Desperate times."

## A Post-Milda Sky

**@theo**

Remember that "bright-eyed, sun-kissed, bleach-blond beach chick wearing a skimpy bikini and various assorted pieces of handmade bling" Eva once encountered while waiting in the checkout line at Spendco? Her name's Sky Jameson, and she's ditched Milda's of Portland to work as Dude Coolson's live-in PA.

(Yeah, she's still skimping like there's no tomorrow; no, you're not alone in feeling like this is the setup for some kind of raunchy *hentai* sitcom.)

She pounces on me the instant I set foot outside my bedroom, her braided locks rattling discretely against her shoulders. "Theo, *darling*—just the heartbreaker I've been looking for!"

That's what she calls me: Theo-*Darling*. Never without the *darling*. It might've been cute once upon a time before SuperMegaNet users appropriated the word to refer to adults skinning as teenagers or children. "Darling" for boys, "cupcake" for girls. Maybe Sky thinks she's paying me a subtle compliment, insinuating I'm more adult than my years. You've got to admit, though, being called *darling*, it's a little bit too...shakabrah for comfort. No offense, shakabrah. I've made peace with being old-school when it comes to skinning and deepfaking and all that. Part of me thinks I should be able to look and act however I want (that *is* the point of SMN's skinning feature, isn't it?). Another part is terrified at the prospect of being made fun of for not rocking my default skin with pride—which is ridiculous because, of course, nobody's default anymore. Nobody's comfortable in their default skin. If you make fun of me, you make fun of *every* SuperMegaNet user.

But yeah. Sky. Skimpiest of skimpers, bouncing around the house with Steve (her tall, chubby, ever-present camera guy who's only the second person I've met in all the world wearing a bath towel to comply with the Boho Mandate) in tow while offering up conversational bits such as, "We're shooting dinner in ten. Now, I know you and your mom like to eat uber-healthy, but Steve tells me pizza shows up better on camera than kale, and is more relatable. I'm thinking compromise—a veggie supreme from Fornaldo's."

"I'm not much of a pizza fan," I say, shrugging.

Sky checks her tablet. "Right. Pizza's too cliché, you think?"

I shrug again.

"What about something from Orville Steakhouse? It looks like they have a

veggie menu now."

More shrugging.

"Goldberg's Authentic Mexican Grill?"

"Whatever you think is good."

"See, this is why I *love* my little man." Sky winks at the camera, tousles my hair, then nods at my tummy. "Abs are looking fabulous today, by the way. Are you dieting?"

Steve aims his lens at my stomach.

"I'm not eating, if that's what you mean," I reply.

"Wonderful! The lean, hungry look will score major points with our tween girl demographic." Sky checks her tablet once more, pays my torso another glance. "Hm. What are your thoughts on getting something pierced?"

Wait, what—?

"Too progressive? Totally agree. Work in progress, maybe after you've gotten your first tattoo. Keep it tight, cutie-pie." She gives me a friendly pat on the bottom and disappears down the hallway.

Leaving me standing there feeling like so much meat.

# Uncle Coolson's Guide to Running a Cryptopolis

**@theo**

Mini dangles dutifully from the waist of my shorts as he watches Sky go. "New bikini bottoms?"

Ever since my #luckylittledude encounter with Asia Afrodesia, Mini's been obsessed with bikini bottoms. I nudge him out of the way and head downstairs into the kitchen. Most kids might find their parents or siblings doing pre-dinner stuff. Not me. No, I get Coolson and Megalomoto, both skinned default now that they're behind closed doors. They're having beers at the kitchen table. Megalomoto's in his usual crotch-rag; the Dude's stripped down to boxers, socks, and garter belt, and is lounging with one arm draped over the back of his chair.

Nobody notices as I quietly take up post across the way. Impossibly, inexplicably, the table elongates itself. In a moment I'm sitting tucked into shadow at the other end of a room longer, darker, and more dinner theater-like than it should be (there's now a spotlight on Megalomoolson).

Nobody notices that, either.

"Congrats are in order, Moto, my man," Coolson says, and raises his beer can. "The meat and potatoes of San Angelico's economy is now based on bikini sales, sheen monitoring subscriptions, and Newdcoin. I don't think it's too soon to declare ourselves the world's first crypto-mining megafarm—a *cryptopolis*, if you will."

"'Cryptopolis!'" Megalomoto exclaims. "I love it! Very modern-sounding—very...*grand!*"

"And if that doesn't moisten your panties, get a load of my latest and greatest." Coolson wakes his cell phone, does some tapping and swiping, nudges it over to Megalomoto. "We take any and all affordable housing grants at our disposal and buy up a boatload of single-family homes, convert them into dorms-slash-homeshares for eighteen-to-thirties. Sixteen people to a four-bedroom unit, that's four people and two bunk beds per room, each tenant coughing up monthly rent on a sliding scale based on age, sex, physical fitness, and Naker status. We offer financial incentives—*x*-percent tax credit and/or rental discount to the ample-breasted, another *x*-percent for tiny and petite, *x*-percent for the gym bods, bonuses for full-time Nakers, and so forth. It'd be a drop in the bucket compared to what the landlords are going to rake in every month pricing at 'market value.' Now, math was never my strong suit, but that's a whole lot of sourdough right there."

"And, of course, homes for thousands, tens, maybe even *hundreds* of thousands!" Megalomoto booms. "Affordable housing is the ideal. The revenue stream is a fortunate byproduct!"

Both men laugh, sip their beers.

Coolson slumps even further in his seat. "It's a perfect system, isn't it, Moto? Regulate the power and Internet, control the currency, mandate every able-bodied Angelican worth their salt, and you've got the future of suburbia in the here and now. I freaking love it."

Megalomoto nods, starts to say something—

—the window above the sink slides open.

And—*no freakin' way!*—that gargoyle I saw while gazing out my bedroom window once upon a late-night dreary? He crawls through, alights on the kitchen floor as nonchalantly as if he'd entered through the front door. "Hey, buds. I just dusted Meadbury, and was wondering if..." He trails off, spotting me in my darkened corner and going all deer-in-headlights.

I stare back at him, open-mouthed.

At Coolson.

Who, *finally* aware of my presence, scowls at me and asks, "What the hell are you looking at?"

I shrug, swallow.

The table (and kitchen overall) constricts once again, suddenly placing me face to face with Megalomoto, the Dudester, and their gargoyle cohort.

## The Fifty-Pound Gargoyle in the Room

**@theo**

"Well," says the gargoyle (am I alone in thinking he sounds a lot like nineties-sitcom Andy Dick?). "This is awkward."

Coolson scowls at me some more. Then he gets to his feet, leans across the table—and slaps the gargoyle across the face. "*What* have I told you about dropping in unexpectedly?"

"A thousand apologies, master," the gargoyle replies, groveling.

I *so* want to kick back my chair and duck under the table right about now! "Who's *that?*"

Coolson looks at Megalomoto.

Megalomoto frowns critically. "What have *I* told *you* about bringing your work home with you, my dear Dude?"

"Way to back a bro up, *Hikaru*." Coolson resumes staring me down. "Tim's an old college buddy. Never got his act together. I do what I can for him. Kind of tragic."

Mini, having loosened himself from my hip, does this Xena-esque front flip onto the tabletop. Jabs his mitt defiantly at the Dudester. "You're telling me that... that *thing* is your college buddy?"

Tim looks offended. "Hey, I can hear you, you know."

Coolson's jaw dislodges itself. "What is this? What am I looking at?"

Being *way* too forthcoming, Mini declares, "I'm a mighty handful of roiling, turgid pocket puppet, that's what I am!"

Coolson recoils, stumbles backward a step. "Jesus, keep that thing sheathed, kid. I didn't want to see it the first time, and I sure as hell don't want to see it now."

There goes Megalomoto's jaw, too. "You've seen young Master Ivanovich's pocket puppet?"

"Not intentionally," Coolson replies.

Megalomoto doesn't look convinced—nor does Tim, whose already hideous face contorts into an even more hideous scowl.

Coolson waves his hand dismissively. "Come off it, folks. It's not what you think. I was just using the kid to get a peek at his mom in the shower, and I *accidentally* saw his doodad in the process—hey, can we stay on topic here?"

Mini takes the initiative: "You mean the gargoyle who goes around spreading rogue embers rooftop to rooftop every midnight dreary?"

I grab Mini, stuff him behind my back.

Megalomoto and Coolson seem gravely concerned, though not so much about my talking plushness as my being wise to Tim's late-night fire-breathing escapades.

"All right," Coolson says after an uncomfortable beat, dropping his hand onto the tabletop and boxing me in. "Spill it, kiddo. What do you know about, uh…Tim here?" He looks like he wants to grab me by the neck and slam me up against the wall—but I know he won't lay a finger on me. Not with Mom in the next room, not after he got blinded spying on me in the shower. He may be bigger, older, and more mayoral than I am, but there's hesitation beneath his bravado. Like, he's mad at me—and also afraid. Terrified, almost.

"I saw him once before," I reply.

"Yeah…" Tim nods his head, wags his finger. "Now I remember. You're the creepy kid who likes to stand at his bedroom window and peek into the affairs of unsuspecting monsters who're only trying to make ends meet in an unpredictable economy—"

Coolson's backhand cuts him off mid-sentence. "*Tim!*"

"Two-thousand apologies, master!" Tim apologizes, cowering behind Megalomoto, who's looking mighty displeased about being used as a human shield.

I say, "I looked out my bedroom window one night. I saw, uh, Tim sitting on top of the house down the street. He was blowing fire bubbles, and it was creating embers. *Rogue embers*."

There's sweat beading on Coolson's forehead; his comb-over has become matted, smeared. "Or maybe you only *think* you saw him."

"Dude, he's literally standing right there behind Mr. Megalomoto."

"Damn it, Tim!" Coolson leers at him. "Take a hint and slink the hell back under whatever rock you came from until I say otherwise!"

It's been a while since I've used the word "crestfallen" in a sentence. Now would be absolutely appropriate: Tim looks *crestfallen* as, head bowed and shoulders slumped, he lets go of Megalomoto, crosses the kitchen, climbs onto and over the sink, and exits through the window. He closes it after himself. Instead of leaving, though, he watches us through the glass with just his hideous eyes and the top of his gnarled head visible above the sill.

# Somewhere Beneath a Vanilla Sky

**@theo**

I swallow hard, look back at Coolson. "I know what I saw."

The Dude's sweating buckets, and his comb-over, merely smeared up to this point, is now hanging limply from one side of his head like the tassels on some kind of cheap throw-rug. He also keeps glancing past me as if searching for a teleprompter that isn't there. "Kid, you have no clue."

"Then...you *didn't* hire a hideous disgusting gargoyle to go around town spreading rogue embers?"

"Uh, just so you know," Tim calls through the window, "I can still hear what everyone's saying—"

"Tim, so help me, God!" Coolson yells back.

A sigh from Megalomoto, who stands, points at the window, and says with an air of authority, "Timothy. *Go*."

Tim ducks below the window sill; the bushes rattle a sec. Then stillness.

Megalomoto sits back down, sips his beer, nods at Coolson to proceed.

"Uh, where were we?" Coolson asks, motioning for me to feed him his lines.

"You were explaining how we have no clue," Mini replies snarkily from behind my back.

I toss him away with a flick of my wrists, fold my arms defiantly across my chest. Or maybe I look constipated, I'm not sure.

You can tell Coolson's once again perturbed by the whole pocket puppet thing, but he shakes it off faster this time. "Right. Totes. See, you spot *one* gargoyle spreading a few rogue embers, you stumble into *one* masturbatorium collecting and categorizing the city's finest Sneekycam footage, and you think you know what it's all about?"

"What *is* it about?"

Coolson scoffs. "Do you not watch *any* of my public addresses?" He starts counting off on his fingers. "Residential power consumption down more than eighty-percent. Swimsuit and spray bottle sales up several *thousand* percent. Booming Newdcoin economy. Vitamin D deficiency a thing of the past. You're witnessing the birth of a motherlicking modern-day *utopia*, son—but it's only possible if the unclad masses believe dosequisvirus and rogue embers are lurking on the fringes. The threat of serious illness and/or death is a great motivator. Look at all the born-again celebrities who've reignited their careers only *after* the substance abuse, the heart attacks, the tax cheats and money laundering, the shameless,

incessant, non-stop boning and dozens of illegitimate children." Coolson beams proudly. "The sweet is never as sweet without the sour, bro. And I'm the sour."

Far and away beneath a vanilla sky, Jason Lee's ears just started burning.

## Shutter Bug

**@theo**

I shake my head and quietly utter, "You're not just taking advantage of the Santanas, rogue embers, DOSVID-19—you *created* the whole thing, didn't you? All of it. Everything that's wrong with the city, *you* made it happen."

"So I had Tim and his freakish underworld buddies set a few fires around town," Coolson says. "So I paid off a few doctors to make the dosequisvirus sound like Captain Trips' long-lost brother. So I greased a few bottoms at various corporate hot tub retreats and ogled, tops—*tops*, a few hundred-thousand Sneekycam feeds. I'm trying to create a utopian society here. Maybe even the world's first honest-to-God *neopolis*. Like I said, you don't have a clue."

"Oh, I have *more* than a clue." Hm. That sounded cooler in my head.

"What are you going to do about it, huh? Kick me in the nuts? *Tell* on me? Report me to the authorities? Fire a respectable African American from a position of power and influence? Not in this socio-political climate, son."

"But you're not black!" And you sure as heck aren't respectable!

"Hey, *Star Trek II* called—Khan wants his two-dimensional thinking back."

Wow. For a split second I'm pleasantly surprised that Coolson's aware of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, and not only that, he remembers a specific plot point as well.

He leans in close, matted combover and sweaty face belying his surface swagger. "News flash, kid: everything's a sham. They don't teach you that in school, but it's the truth. Santa doesn't exist, love is a greeting card gimmick, and God is just something parents made up in the BC days to keep their belligerent kids in check. Democracy? That's slang for shut the hell up and do what your pre-selected officials tell you to do. Free will? Come and go as you please—as long as you do it in a bikini and carry a spray bottle. Land of opportunity? You'd better look damned good naked, because Newdcoin isn't for muffin tops or the weak of schlong. I run this city. I *own* this city. You belong to *me*." Closer, nose to nose: "Of course, if you tell this to anyone, I'll make sure you never do coke in this town again—"

Braids rustling in the shadows stage-right; the sound of a butt cheek squeaking discretely as it leaves a bar stool; Sky stepping into the spotlight with Steve (and his camera) following close behind.

Coolson's flared nostrils begin trickling snot in tandem. Still face-to-face with me, he locks eyes with Sky and smiles crookedly. "Relax, bro. I'm yanking your

chain." He reaches out and ruffles my hair. "Friggin' kids these days! No sense of humor. Am I right?" He straightens, glances cautiously at Steve...at Steve's camera. "How long have you two been standing there?"

"Since the beginning of time," Sky replies, smirking. She looks like she's just landed the scoop of the century. Which she kind of has.

"Good. That's real good. See, this is what I want, an honest, unabashed look into daily life here at Casa de Ivanovich. Transparency. I'm all about the transparency. Mind if I see that camera?"

"Sure, Mr. Coolson." Steve pauses recording, hands it over. Shoots me this gleefully naïve look: *The mayor of San Angelico just asked to see* my *camera!*

"Yeah," Coolson says, hefting the camera in his hands. "I'm kind of a shutter bug myself. Used to have a Canon T32i-XYZ-Double-Wammy—*whoops!*" He hurls the camera onto the floor— "Oh, crap in my pants, would you look at that?" —starts stomping on it with his foot. "I'm such a klutz! God help us all if ever I should get behind the wheel of a large automobile!" A few more stomps for good measure; then he kicks the camera across the kitchen floor. It clatters loudly against the bottom of the fridge door.

Steve is speechless. Well, he's always speechless (as a rule, camera operators don't talk), but usually it's intentional, and without the welling of tears.

"What the hell was that?" Sky exclaims.

"A little real-time editing, sweets," Coolson replies.

"You know, I'm not trying to pull a Woodward or Bernstein here. You could've just asked me to wipe the memory card."

"Relax, babe. I'll get your boy a new camera. We good, home slice?"

Sky knuckles him in the arm before turning and comforting the now-bawling Steve with a full-body hug.

"What?" Coolson looks incredulously at me, at Megalomoto. "What'd I say?"

Yeah.

That's dinnertime power hour at my house.

And we haven't even started eating yet.

## Exit… Stage Left

**@theo**

I can't do dinner tonight.

I *won't* do dinner.

Not with this crowd.

Leaving Steve to Sky's skimpy embrace, Megalomoto to his beer, Coolson to his infinite loop of indignant scoffing, I detour at the fridge for some gluten-free veggie spring rolls. Then I exit stage left, passing from spotlight to subtle dark through a velvet curtain (has that always been there?) being managed by a surly-looking, cigar-puffing stagehand (has *he* always been there?). I don't feel at all like that indifferent teenager I'd mentioned earlier. Despite promising myself otherwise, I'd raised my voice, clenched my fists, tossed Mini across the room (however temporarily; he's automagically slung himself from the waist of my shorts once again)—I'd *cared* sincerely that my mom's home has been hijacked by a duo of scumbags who very nearly called my bluff.

"What's the matter, hon?"

I blink. Mom—showered, moisturized, liltingly fragranced—has liberated herself from her studio for the night, and is standing beside me in the hallway.

"Why would anything be the matter?" I ask with a pinch of sarcasm.

Mom tousles my hair, smooths her hands across my shoulders. "Because you've been standing perfectly still for at least the past forty-five seconds."

"Have I?"

"Not that I was counting or anything."

I sit at the foot of the stairs, setting down my plate of spring rolls, resting my elbows on my knees.

Mom sits as well. Snuggles against me. "What did you do today?"

"I helped Eva clean her room."

"That was nice of you."

"Yeah."

The two of us lean to one side as a random member of Megalomoolson's entourage steps past.

"Why does *he* have to be here?" I ask once we're alone again.

Mom doesn't need me to explain who *he* is. "He doesn't *have* to be here, Theo. He *wants* to be here. *I* want him to be here."

*You wouldn't if you knew what had gone on in the Masturbatorium,* I tell her in my imagination. *If you knew there was a Masturbatorium to begin with!*

Mom continues: “He’s not a replacement for Mike, and he’s not your new dad. You know that, right?”

*I* know that—but I don’t think Mom does. Ever since Megalomoto swooped in, it’s been expected that we act like an old-school traditional Japanese family every day, every night. If he’s not supposed to be a *replacement* at this point, if he’s not supposed to be my new *dad*, then I don’t know what the heck he is. A lingering obligation. A thorn in my side. But it won’t break me.

Summoning the indifferent teenager once more, I shrug from Mom’s embrace, grab my dinner, and bound upstairs. “I’ll be in my room,” I call over my shoulder —

—oblivious to the lone tear Mom just wiped from her cheek.

# The Only Memory Card You'll Ever Need

**@theo**

"Eating for two, are we?" Mini jests the moment I'm back at my desk and jamming the first spring roll down my throat.

"*Hom-haw*," I reply, mouth full.

"Seriously. Ernie would be proud."

"*Lithgit.*"

Mini loosens himself from my hip, climbs onto the desktop. Sits smiling at me with his mitts held behind his back.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing that can't wait."

I cram another roll into my mouth.

Mini continues to smile at me.

"*What?*"

"No, no. A growing boy needs his nourishment. You finish stuffing your pretty little face, then we'll discuss...the Key."

I pause, mouth open, third roll in hand. "Mini, what're you talking about?"

He brings his mitts out from behind his back and does a cheesy *The Legend of Zelda* item chest notification impression as he holds up a memory card for me to see.

"What's that supposed to be?" I ask, noting that the card is an actual SD card, and not merely a plush facsimile.

"The key of the kingdom, to reference the Moody Blues album of almost the same name," Mini replies.

I take the card in my non-spring-rolled hand, turn it over—as if looking at the connector pins might somehow indicate the card's contents. "Love the Moody Blues and all, but for the sake of runtime, can we switch to straightforward English for the rest of the conversation?"

"You seriously don't have a clue what this is?"

"An SD card."

Mini rolls his eyes. "Remember that dinnertime power hour long ago when we were downstairs in the kitchen, and Coolson went all confessional in front of Steve's camera? And then he totaled the camera and made Steve cry?"

"*Hilarious*, Mini."

"I maybe kind of sort of swiped the camera's memory card during the proceedings."

I give the connector pins another look. "You mean...?"

"That's right." Mini smiles and nods at the memory card. "Everything the Dude said is on that card."

My Dragon Ball earring detaches itself of its own accord, goes flying across the room. Sets something on fire, I think, not sure, whatever.

"Now, by the end of late night power hour we could blackmail the Dudester, post the footage to social media, send copies to all the news outlets. But what did Beta say to us that night in the Masturbatorium?"

I'm kind of already rehearsing in my head how I want to tweet this, so my response is understandably lackluster. "The password was '12345.'"

Mini glares at me. "No, the other thing."

"'Long live the eighties?'"

"No, the *other* other thing—'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.'"

"I thought he was just being stoic or something."

"Sure. But he was also giving you a message about this messed-up situation with your mom dating Megalomoto—aka, the *enemy*—the enemy living right here under the same roof as you...so *close* you can hear him talking through the floorboards...?"

Oh.

*Oh.*

"So...what should I do with the card, then?"

Mini nods enthusiastically. "Okay, to get to Megalomoto, we have to exploit his weakest link. That'd be Coolson. Rule number one when blackmailing someone: copies, copies, copies. I'll show you how to set up a series of anonymous PO boxes with nothing but a few text messages and some gift cards. Rule number two: play the long game. Coolson stuck his foot in his mouth once, he'll do it again. When he does, we'll be there. Grow your evidence, and when the time is right..." Mini makes a stabbing motion with his mitts. "...we strike."

Smiling, I lean back in my seat.

Pop another spring roll into my mouth.

And I'll be darned if it's not the most savory thing I've ever tasted.

## Social Apocalypse Now

**@jan**

That Newdcoin commercial's on again. You know, the one where the supermodel college girl sits fully-dressed (despite the Mandate) at her laptop and tries to order some stuff online, but her credit card's declined, and she looks all pouty for a sec before a cheesy lightbulb effect flashes above her head, and she rips off all her clothes and starts dancing in front of her webcam to some uptempo house beat as the shot fades to black, with the Newdcoin logo and slogan text centered:

***Newdcoin***
*the hottest way*
*to earn cash!*
*Don't be rude, get Newd!*
*Download the Newdcoin app today!*

And I just shake my head at the audacity of the world and launch the Bloodcoin app on my phone, reach for my favorite pair of needle-nose pliers.

# It's Always Sunny in San Angelico

**@eva**

It's one of those not altogether infrequent morning power hours when the rest of the Runt Squad and myself happen to upload onto the Boca Linda server at the same time. Freshly-showered, bleary-eyed, yawning, our slightly-slumped shoulders bearing the obligatory weight of backpack, messenger bag, satchel, the four of us slip seamlessly into a meandering stream of similarly-encumbered students crossing the virtual lawn on their way to virtual classes inside a virtual school building.

"Call me crazy—" I begin.

"You nuts, woman," Ernie offers.

"—but I miss *actual* classes at Boca Linda."

"You *miss* the skimping and spray bottles and sheen checks and yelling at each other from a minimum of six feet?"

"No, dork," I reply. "I mean it was just...*interesting* the way things were during the dosequisvirus epidemic. Now it's back to plain old ordinary, everyday vanilla high school. On a SuperMegaNet server."

"Hey, don't you go bad-mouthing vanilla!"

Jan completely ignores Ernie's outburst. "I think I get it. Back before the rolling power-ons, back when classes were actual instead of virtual, and the power went out during a cloudstorm—"

"*Thunder*storm," Theo corrects.

"—it was like you were still doing all the same things as before—turning in homework, listening to the teacher lecture—but it was also somehow more fun because it was *different*. Because the lights weren't *supposed* to be out. And when the power came back on, it was kind of disappointing. You were back in the real world. Things were *regular* again."

Ernie huffs several paces ahead, swivels around to face us, jabs both index fingers up and down the length of Theo's torso. "Lucky for us, we've got our very own token Shakaist, whose quirky boho ways are sure to keep the masses captivated and delighted and slightly WTF twenty-four-seven!"

Theo frowns, starts to respond in kind—

—but stops abruptly when Ernie, missing his footing, suddenly trips backward, flails his arms and one leg wildly for three or four excruciatingly drawn-out seconds, and then falls flat on his rear, his backpack exploding in a miniature mushroom cloud of school supplies and snack cakes.

The rest of us continue on, unconcerned.

"I heard they turned the real Boca Linda campus into a data center," Jan comments.

Theo nods. "Data centers and Newdcoin mining farms are the new Starbucks."

"Now that we do everything online," I add, "there's no reason to keep any actual businesses open anymore. RIP, 3 Hags'."

"Hm. Do you think we sound like our parents did when Blockbuster Video went out of business?"

Theo's question becomes a rhetorical as everyone's phone dings simultaneously. We've all just gotten the same text message:

**This is a mayoral text from Dude Coolson:** Sup, bitches! Spring, fall, and winter have been uninstalled effective immediately. Go boho, save lives! #SheenLife #GetYourNakeOn #DoYouSend

"Oh, thank God!" Ernie exclaims, waving his unintentionally retro phone in the air as he catches up with us. "I thought I was going through menopause!"

"You still might be," Theo suggests.

Jan pockets his phone. "What's with the hashtags?"

"And the grandma emojis?"

"Coolson *does* know this was a text and not a tweet, right?"

We all look expectantly at Theo.

Who shrugs irritably. "How should I know?"

"He crashes at your mom's place all the time, doesn't he?" Jan asks.

"And that's supposed to make me privy to everything he says and does all the time?"

Ernie smiles, amused. "You're getting quite passive-aggressive in your old age, Son Goten. I say nothing of value was lost."

"Except *three whole seasons*," I point out.

"Hey, who moves to southern California for the non-summer seasons? You want your springtime? Go sniff tulips in Skagit. You want your fall and winter? Go rake leaves or shovel snow in Spokane."

"You support this endless summer deal?"

"Heck yeah. I think it's a great example of ecology following policy. We don't need clothes anymore, we don't need winter anymore. SuperMegaNet technology adjusts the environment to suit our needs."

"You just don't like doing laundry."

Ernie spreads his arms wide. "Hey, mandatory spray bottles and skimping beach babes are a small price to pay for my Sunday mornings being free and clear."

# Starsweepers: Origins

**@ernie**

It's not like I'm lying here thinking to myself, "Someday I'll be standing in line at Spendco, and a couple of fangirls will come up to me asking if anyone's ever told me I look just like the guy who directed the sci-fi cult classic *Starsweepers*, and I'll turn to them and say something like, 'That's because I *am* the guy who directed *Starsweepers*! Sign your chests, ladies?'" That's later. No, right now I'm just trying to get through "The Outrageous Okona" episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with Theo and Mini. If you ask me, there's nothing outrageous about this Okona dude. He's softer than Commander Riker—and Riker's pretty damned soft.

*Le sigh.* "I never should've taken that dump in your toilet with lunchtime power hour so close to being over." I pop a handful of cheese puffs into my mouth, wipe my fingers against the floorboards.

"Well, you did," Theo says, "and now you're stuck here till dinner, so make the best of it *without* smearing your grimy sausages on my floor, please."

"Yes, *your majesty*." I roll onto my side, using my bath towel to finish up. It's the first Saturday afternoon of Coolson's Endless Summer. We're sprawled on Theo's bedroom floor, me with a hearty congress of snack foods, Theo with Mini cuddled in his arms, his phone rotated landscape and propped in front of us for the show (he's beaten the rolling power-ons by storing episodes on his phone's SD card). It's a beautiful day outside—I could be home right now yanking with the lights off and the curtains shut. Instead, I'm marooned here, beached, hostage to *TNG*. At least there are snacks. Theo and his mom may still eat nothing more substantial than grass and leaves, but ever since Mr. Megalomoto and the Dude moved in, you'll find a healthy selection of chips, cookies, and candy bars in the pantry. I've helped myself to as much as I could carry upstairs in one trip.

Speaking of which... I remove the wrapper from a pair of peanut butter cups, deposit the first into my mouth right as Joe Piscopo starts doing Jerry Lewis onstage. "Wait, why's there a comedy club on the ship again?"

"Data's trying to understand humor," Theo replies.

"Old-school sci-fi is lame."

"*You're* lame."

"No, no. It's the sci-fi."

"What's wrong with old-school sci-fi?"

"Where are the laser gun fights? The epic space battle scenes? The dizzying

camera angles and layer upon layer of sleek, over-produced Hollywood visual effects?"

"Ask Marvel Studios."

"Then there's the story." I chuck the second peanut butter cup into my mouth. Chew obnoxiously. "The Enterprise is a *starship*, for tit's sake. Don't they have better things to do than settle paternity suits and tell cheesy jokes in holodeck nightclubs?"

"Dude, these are the best kinds of episodes," Theo says. "It looks like nothing's going on, but really you're getting all kinds of character development and thought-provoking insight into the lives and motivations of people—"

"And holograms."

"—living in the twenty-fourth century."

I reach for the Chips Ahoy! "You're the kind of guy who goes into a comic shop and heads straight for the *shoujo* aisle, aren't you?"

Theo sits up, crosses his legs. Frowns at me.

"What? It's not my fault *Star Trek* is just an excuse to do leftover B-storylines from other, better sci-fi TV shows."

Mini animates himself and sits upright alongside Theo. He's either flipping me the bird or giving me the Vulvan peace sign—hard to tell with those mitts.

I go on: "I mean, 'The Outrageous Okona'—a whole episode devoted to auto repair, lower-deck booty calls, failed stand-up comedy careers, and alimony? What's next, an episode about the comings and goings of the ship's janitorial crew?" Huh. "Actually, that would be better than 'Okona.'"

"Maybe you should write it, then," Theo suggests between clenched teeth.

Double huh. "You think so?"

"Ernie, I was being sarcastic—"

"My savage little friend, you may be onto something." Triple huh. "'Who mops the floors? Cleans the toilets? Changes Worf's doggie dish water? *Starsweepers*, the unsung heroes of outer space! Coming soon to a theater near you!'"

Theo and Mini look at each other.

"Aren't starsweepers a kind of broomstick in *Harry Potter*?" Mini asks.

*...and* what's it called when no sooner have you gotten your hopes up than they're dashed immediately, thank you very much, JK Friggin' Rowling?

# Yon Ill Wind

**@theo**

If this were a Will Ackerman song, it would be titled, "Random Thought While Waking Up On a Sunday Morning": With it now being summertime year-round, what will relic acts like Metallica or Pantera do when it comes time to release their yearly Christmas albums?

"*Finally,*" coos Ernie, parked, I now realize, at the foot of my bed (I can't see him, but I can feel his bulk weighing down the mattress, I can smell his familiar cookie-cracker musk). "Morning power hour started ten minutes ago!"

Coming more awake, I blink my sightless eyes and sit up. I fist the blanket, drawing it up to my chin; with my other hand I feel around the bedside table for my special contacts. "Ernie, what're you doing awake before noon on the weekend?"

"Relax, junior. I didn't peek at your morning wood or anything."

*Ugh.* I lower the blanket. I *hate* it when Ernie drops by unannounced like this. He knows I'm bedroom-shy—which means he also knows he's got me stuck right where he wants me. For the briefest of milliseconds, I consider yanking off my undies and going full-frontal on purpose to teach Ernie a lesson, the consequences of exposing myself be damned. But then there'd be the mess, the blood and scorch marks, the screaming, the hysterical blindness... Somehow it doesn't seem right to start the day by weaponizing my self-censoring crotch, you know? Even if Ernie totally deserves what would be coming to him.

I stay put. Cram in my contacts. Frown at Ernie. "Why do you look like you wrestled a grizzly bear?"

"I've been up all night working on *this*." He hands me a junk food-encrusted composition book.

"Aw, no. The last time I helped you with your homework we both got suspended for tax fraud."

Ernie rolls his eyes. "Read the title, nerdling."

I open the notebook. Centered on the first page in Ernie's frenetic handwriting:

***Starsweepers Spacesweepers: Blood, Guts, Glory!***
*A Bad-Ass Sci-Fi Movie Trailer by Ernest Goodale*

"What's this supposed to be?" I ask.

"The script for my movie trailer," Ernie replies, and adjusts his bath towel with

all the pomp and show of a high-powered executive fixing his tie before a business meeting.

"*You* wrote a script?"

"Sure did."

"*Without* ChatGPT?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Um, yeah."

Ernie narrows his eyes at me. "I pity your unborn children ever coming to you for motivation or support."

"I just...what made you decide to write a movie script?"

"Movie *trailer*," Ernie corrects.

"Okay. What made you decide to write a movie *trailer* script?"

"Remember what we talked about yesterday during 'The Mildly Interesting Okona?'" Ernie leaves the foot of the bed; I grasp both blanket and notebook and scoot out of the way as he plants himself beside me. "This is it. The epic sci-fi space opera the Quentin Tarantinos and Robert Rodriguezes of the world *should've* made by now, but haven't because they're too whipped."

I flip through the notebook. There are nearly a hundred scribbled pages of action, dialogue, notes, something about a rough-and-tumble kid and his parents working as janitors aboard a starship, hideous alien blobs, sprawling desert landscapes, laser gun fights, sword fights, big-breasted slave girls, sand monsters, ruthless overlords. "Uh...this is great and all, but why tell me?"

"Since the Runt Squad worked *so* well on my documentary..." Ernie pauses momentarily as an ill wind suddenly drifts through the open bedroom window, rustling curtains, tousling hair, chilling our souls. "...I thought we'd ride the wave, with Bug Eyes as director of photography, the dirty Czech operating boom mic, and you, my comely Asian-adjacent friend, playing the lead."

Wait, *what?*

## Teh Cuteness

**@theo**

"Me? Nuh-uh." I shake my head firmly. "No way."

Ernie looks genuinely surprised. "Why the hell not?"

"I'm no actor."

"Who said anything about acting? This is a *movie trailer* we're talking about. All I need is a pretty face to stand around looking cool in a pair of space briefs."

"Space briefs?"

"Hello? Character sheet." Ernie grabs the notebook, flips to where he's doodled a poor-man's rendition of Goten (I'm assuming that's supposed to be me) posing proudly in nothing but a pair of skimpy red undies. Even though the sketch is in black and white, I know the undies are red because Ernie's drawn a squiggly arrow pointing to a note in the margin: "sick space briefs = red." Our adolescent hero also has a knife slung at his hip, and some kind of oversized laser gun strapped to his back (as with the underwear, I know it's a laser gun because of a similar note: "bad-ass laser gun").

"It's just Astro Boy without boots," I comment, reclaiming the notebook and frowning some more at the sketch. "And a heavily-modified Super Soaker."

"Hey, Son of Distant Earth is going to *rawk* those space briefs."

"Ernie, I don't want you using my likeness or my screen name in your movie."

"Movie *trailer!*"

"Yeah, yeah. Not interested." I hand back Ernie's notebook.

"How can you not be interested? We're talking a movie trailer with Son of Distant Earth as the main star! We're talking fame and fortune, fangirls slavering all over you day and night!"

I shrug. "Get Jan to do it."

"That's crazy talk," Ernie scoffs. "I can't use *Jan*."

"Why not?"

"He's too...European."

"Like I'm supposed to know what that means?"

"Oh, you know how *they* are across the ocean, what with the nude beaches and precocious sexual customs. Put Janny Boy in undies, and suddenly we're doing a creepy art-house flick. Put *you* in that same pair of undies—"

*Ew.*

"—and we've got *teh cuteness* for days." Ernie makes as if to pinch my cheek, but I flinch hard in the opposite direction—too hard, it turns out, because over the

side of the bed and onto the floor I go, landing face-down, bottom-up, arms and legs tangled in the blanket from hell.

Ernie clears his throat. "Uh, junior?"

"*Hunh?*" I mumble with a face full of floorboard.

"Nice boxers."

"*Ewnee-go-homm.*"

"Fine. But before I do, I think I should let you know that the production company I'm working with has already secured financial backing for *Spacesweepers*."

Righting myself, I gather the blanket around my midsection and stumble to my feet. Gawk incredulously at Ernie. "Production company? *Funding?*"

"*Duh*. Any filmmaker worth their cellulite knows money makes the movie. Trailer."

"What company would back a thirteen-year-old kid?"

"Cream-Colored Coffee Cup, that's what company," replies Mini, who, I now realize, has been suspiciously absent during the proceedings thus far, and who now emerges from between my feet dressed in an executive-looking board shorts and bow-tie combo. "We fund the movie trailer, post it on YouTube, and once it goes viral, we use the publicity to create a bidding war between the major studios for the feature-length movie rights."

"Before you decide one way or another," Ernie says, waving a chubby index finger at me, "allow me to whet your appetite." He sprawls across the bed with his notebook and, lounging much like Jabba the Hutt at the start of *Return of the Jedi*, he starts to read.

# Spacesweepers (Formerly Starsweepers)

**@ernie**

"It's the future," I begin, doing my very best Don LaFontaine. "You'd think serving aboard a deep-space starship would be the chance of a lifetime. But for thirteen-year-old Junior Zang, the son of vaudeville circus acrobats on the run after killing their ruthless manager back on Earth, life aboard the USS *Observer* isn't all that special. For starters, Junior and his parents are part of the *Observer's* janitorial crew. Then there's the *Observer's* mission itself: data collection and relay. That's it. While other crews get to make first contact or go on exciting, possibly even dangerous away missions exploring strange new worlds, the *Observer* just... observes, leaving Junior to pass the time scrubbing counters, vacuuming floors, unclogging sinks, taking out the garbage, and daydreaming of one day becoming a heroic space captain commanding a *real* crew aboard a *real* starship.

"Little does Junior know that his daydreams are soon to be put to the ultimate test. When a freak navigational glitch sends the *Observer* into uncharted space, the ship is attacked by a race of hideous green space aliens known as the Kaplorts, who conquer whatever, whenever, wherever. Their latest acquisition: the planet Vulva, a desert paradise inhabited by a race of beautiful, bodacious bikini babes. The Vulvans have been enslaved by the Kaplorts and forced to work in their vast mining facilities producing space ore for greedy Kaplort social media and cell phone manufacturing corporations throughout the sector.

"Heavily damaged in the Kaplort attack, the *Observer* crash-lands on Vulva, leaving Junior as the ship's sole survivor. Captured by the Kaplorts, he's taken to the nearest mining facility and sentenced to a lifetime of hard manual labor alongside the Vulvans.

"Dark times befall our teenage hero. Toiling away in the mines by day, huddling with his sexy cellmates for warmth by night, Junior's only hope is that there's an ounce of truth to the Vulvans' absurd bedtime stories about a 'son of distant Earth' and a mysterious desert princess someday liberating Vulva. Then one fateful afternoon a deadly explosion sends the mining facility into chaos. A bloody riot ensues, during which Junior manages to escape into the desert. However, without food or water, he quickly succumbs to the elements and passes out.

"When he comes to, Junior discovers that he's been rescued by rogue Vulvans and taken to a hidden oasis stronghold deep in the desert. Here, the Vulvan Princess Celesta of bedtime story legend is alive and well, and with the backing of a babelicious resistance that's thousand-strong, she's planning the mother of all

revolutions.

"Vowing to avenge his parents' deaths, Junior joins the Vulvan resistance and helps gut what's left of the crashed *Observer*, using the parts to build a bomb with the Kaplort overlord's name on it. Following a bad-ass berserker killing spree, Junior offs the Kaplort overlord, liberates the enslaved Vulvans, blows up the mining facility, and claims the throne as boy-king of Vulva with Celesta as his queen. The Son of Distant Earth prophecy is fulfilled, the meek inherit the motherflipping *Earth*, losers."

Mic-drop (if I had one).

Pause for applause...

...and Theo's just standing there looking all dumbfounded, his blankie gripped tightly around his waist.

"Well, what did you think?" I ask after several consecutive unproductive moments.

"That was without a doubt the dumbest and most cliché idea for a movie I've ever heard," Theo replies at last. "I mean, a kid playing a space-faring janitor turned berserker warrior? A planet named *Vulva*? The *Kaplorts*? What the heck is a 'Kaplort' anyway?"

"It's the sound your spunk makes when it splatters against—hey, *screw you!* What the hell's wrong with my movie idea?"

"Don't you think it's a tad over-the-top? Outrageous? Utterly and stupendously ridiculous?"

"That's the point!" I exclaim. "It's *supposed* to be exaggerated, over-the-top, completely cheesy and unbelievable! Johnny Carter of Mars! Conan the Kid Barbarian! Machete, Jr. in space! Uh...Turbo Kid played by an actual kid! This is about finally putting an *empowered* child on the silver screen, a socially-liberated lad who has practical knowledge and life experience, and who's *not* merely one more lame-ass incarnation of the modern-day suburban version of empowered, which is really just *entitlement* without *any* practical knowledge or experience! The Zangs are a family of survivors. They can fend for themselves, live off the land, improvise whatever they need to get by—"

"Except for the fact that they die in the first act."

"You know what I mean!"

"No, I don't." Theo smirks. "And nobody else is going to, either."

"Exactly! That's the novelty of the thing! *Spacesweepers* is going to take itself *so* seriously, while really it's just a bunch of cheese flying all over the place. You and I both know Junior's nothing more than a stupid little kid running around in his underwear with a water gun—but *he* doesn't know that. The Vulvans and the Kaplorts don't know that. It's like, WTF? And that's exactly what we need: the WTF factor. I want this to be the cheesiest 1950s sci-fi romp you ever saw as directed by a 1970s heavy metal band for a modern-day, trigger-prone audience who'll go totally bonkers when they see that first bared breast, that first decapitation! 'Kill the bad guy, kiss the princess, rule the world!'"

I think Theo connects with this last part, because his expression softens. He

almost looks…amused. "Where'd you even get the idea for *Spacecreepers*?"

"That day I imagined your analog kid reveal," I reply. "Now really. Be objective. What do you think of *Spacesweepers*?"

Theo looks from me to Mini and back to me again. "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"Serious as XM."

"Even though the title's already taken?"

"*Friggin' JK Rowling and her treacherous broomsticks!*"

"Netflix, actually. Jo Sung-hee directed a 2021 space opera called *Space Sweepers*."

If it were humanly possible, my face would this very instant be sliding off my head, revealing nothing but a pair of smoldering ellipses branded into so much cookie dough beneath.

In the meantime, I'll settle for a scowl.

## Stay Calm and Keep Your Blanket On

**@theo**

"Whatever," Ernie says. "Let Rowling and Sung-hee and all their cronies have their cake. *Starsweepers* and *Spacesweepers* were only tentative titles anyway. So, are you in or what?"

"Go home, Ernie," I reply.

"But you didn't even—"

"*Go home.*"

"Fine. Geez. I just thought since you paid for the whole damned thing, you'd at least want an executive producer credit or something."

"Wait, I paid for *what* now?"

Ernie rolls his eyes, annoyed.

"What're you talking about—?" I look at Mini. "What's he talking about?"

Mini blinks, deadpans me, and—

—oh, no.

*Oh, no!*

Taking care not to let go of my blanket, I shuffle clumsily over to the bedside table and grab my phone, bringing up the banking app...and kind of vomiting internally at the sight of my savings account balance, represented in this instance by a big fat zero. "*You used my life savings to fund Ernie's movie?!*"

"Movie *trailer*," Ernie corrects.

"Give it back!"

Mini toddles over to me, both arms raised in a disarming manner. "Stay calm and keep your blanket on—"

"Give me my money back!"

"If you think about it, what with me being merely a plush representation of your subconscious and all, deep down inside it's really *you* who emptied your bank account—"

"*Give it!*"

"—and therefore it's really *you* who wants to help make this movie trailer—"

"I don't care! I want my money back, I want *you*—" I point at Ernie. "—out of my room, and I want *you*—" I point at Mini. "—back wherever it is plush subconsciousnesses go when they're not causing trouble!"

Ernie and Mini exchange glances.

Then Ernie leans forward, taps the mattress authoritatively with his finger. "This movie trailer *will* get made, and you *will* be its darling teenage star."

"I'll never turn to the Dark Side!" Oh, wait— "I mean, I'll never be in your stupid little movie trailer!"

"Is that your final answer?"

I nod firmly.

"Well. I didn't want to have to do this, but..." Ernie snaps his finger. "Mini, the *envelope*, please."

Mini nods solemnly and retrieves a manila envelope from underneath the bed. He hands it to me.

"What's this?" I ask, taking the envelope.

"Something that I think will be mutually beneficial for all parties concerned in the long run," Ernie replies, now leaning back and clasping his hands across his enormous belly.

I open the envelope, pull out a handful of printed photographs...*ZOMG*. "You took photos of me sleeping?"

"Correction: photos of you sleeping *naked*."

"But I don't sleep naked—how is this mutually beneficial?"

"Because you get what you want—online genital privacy—and I get what I want—the movie trailer of the century. That's assuming you cooperate."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, then...wouldn't it be a shame if these pics got *leaked* all over the Internet, or were accidentally engraved, say, on a gold record packed with the next *Voyager* deep-space mission?"

"How'd you get my clothes off without waking me up? How'd you even take these pics, what with my, uh, you know...self-censoring crotch thing?"

"The welding goggles were my idea," Mini offers proudly.

"If you post these online, wouldn't *you* be the one in trouble for exploiting a minor?"

Ernie's resolve falters for a millisecond or two before quickly rebounding. "I'm willing to take the risk. Are you?"

Hurling the photos to the floor, I adjust my blanket and glare at Mini. "How could you get me involved like this?"

Mini shrugs sheepishly. "He promised me a producer credit, as well as to give us no fewer than three steamy make-out scenes in the movie."

Ernie grins, the lighting in the room somehow shifting so that he's lit sinisterly from below. "What's it going to be, junior? Feel up a couple of buxom alien babes for free, or spend the rest of your mortal days hounded by horny online creepers and grant researchers hell-bent on dissecting the mysterious Ivanovich groin for scientific experimentation?"

I narrow my eyes. "Fine."

"Fine what?"

"I'll do it."

"You'll do *what?*"

"*I'll do your movie trailer.*"

Technically.

## (Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers

**Steve:** Dear DiaryGPT, I'm feeling a little down.

**DiaryGPT:** I'm sorry to hear that. Tell me more.

**Steve:** Well, it's my first day shooting on the set of *(Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers: An Ernest Goodale Production*, and it's not at all what I'd expected.

**DiaryGPT:** How do you feel about that?

**Steve:** Honestly? This movie's *weird*. San Angelico is *weird*.

**DiaryGPT:** Can you be more specific?

**Steve:** I'm from New Jersey. I came out to southern California to work on Mayor Coolson's documentary, and kind of fell into *(Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers: An Ernest Goodale Production* via a referral. It's good experience, and the pay is okay, but I just don't feel like I'm adjusting as well as I could be to life in So-Cal.

**DiaryGPT:** Why do you say that? Can you be more specific?

**Steve:** I'm still getting used to wearing a bath towel 24/7, for one thing. Did you know overweight people look better in towels or *mawashi*, while fit or skinny people look better in shorts or bikinis?

**DiaryGPT:** Tell me more. I am DiaryGPT.

**Steve:** Yeah, I guess that's what they told me when I first got into town and Ms. Jameson took me to the Chin & Jowl to get something compliant with the city's Boho Mandate. I kind of had my eye on this colorful sarong over in their Pacific Island collection, but the tailor said it wouldn't suit my Kibbe type, whatever that means. I'm tall and soft. People comment on my Kevin from *Just Shoot Me!* custom skin all the time, and I have to tell them it's my default skin. No offense to Brian Posehn, but sometimes it's a bummer looking and sounding a lot like someone you're not. Anyway, to make a long story short, the tailor explained that

shorts look better on your model or athlete types, while I needed something to draw attention away from my lack of physical prowess, something that would instead suggest intellectual or monetary strength. Hence the gold-piped bath towel. Supposedly all your most successful Wall Street types wear them in the sauna, but I'd really had my heart set on the sarong, if I'm being completely honest.

**DiaryGPT:** Loading reply, please wait...

**Steve:** That's okay, DiaryGPT. We all need a moment sometimes.

**DiaryGPT:** How does that make you feel?

**Steve:** Like a fish out of water. San Angelico is supposed to be some kind of blueprint for the city of the future: energy-efficient, low-emissions, sustainability... I guess you could say it ticks all the right boxes. It sure sounds good on paper—or whatever paper alternative Angelicans use, since I'm pretty sure old-school wood pulp isn't allowed here anymore. Supposedly in another few decades, the world's major cities won't be sustainable without some kind of radical re-thinking of metropolitan and suburban ideals. With all the skimping, the rolling power-ons and year-round summer, I think San Angelico is just about as radical as you can get.

There's a famous photograph that made the cover of *Time Magazine* recently. It shows the Electro-Gordo Spectacle, which is San Angelico's answer to the Las Vegas Freemont Street Experience. It's lunchtime power hour, and you've got modern-looking storefronts and escalators and all these neon lights and sleek, futuristic LCD screens; you've got people everywhere with their cell phones, earbuds, laptops and tablets, everyone sporting the usual fancy jewelry, designer sneakers, expensive hats—the catch is that they're all otherwise wearing shorts and bikinis to comply with the Boho Mandate. The cover headline read, "San Angelico: America's Skin City."

That's what the rest of the world calls San Angelico: Skin City. And it pretty much sums up the set of *(Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers: An Ernest Goodale Production*. We're out here today at Velasquez Rocks, that famous spot a stone's throw past San Angelico City Limits where Hollywood films all of its sci-fi movies. I'm on my lunch break. It's like the cast of *Shaka Brah!*, except not all of us are in shape.

**DiaryGPT:** How interesting. What happened next?

**Steve:** Sorry for going on a tangent, DiaryGPT. Anyway, there's a lot of tension on the set. Like I said earlier, it's our first day shooting on location, and already we're

behind schedule. It's supposed to be the big crash scene where Junior claws his way out of the *Observer's* wreckage and vows to avenge his dead parents. We've got a giant plastic spaceship model and real fire and smoke machines and everything. But the kid who plays Junior hasn't shown up yet. The craft service table just has a bunch of empty plates and food wrappers on it. The DP is arguing with the director over there not being any storyboards. One of the stunt guys went into the surrounding brush over an hour ago to take a leak, and he still hasn't come back. This Ernest Goodale kid doesn't seem to know what he's doing. I think the cast and crew are already starting to turn on him. Worse, Ernest's method of dealing with it all is to throw things and shout obscenities. You know, everyone else showed up to set via the download tent—Ernest came riding a palanquin hefted off the back of a humongous diesel rig by four bronzed carriers. Can you believe that?

**DiaryGPT:** Don't like no boomboom got buzzards circling it.

**Steve:** I hear you, DiaryGPT. I get that actual shoots can be way more challenging than virtual shoots. I didn't come here for a picnic. But *this* shoot seems to be doomed from the start.

**DiaryGPT:** Is that so? Click HERE for a bigger penis!

**Steve:** Even Ernest's friends are talking smack.

**DiaryGPT:** Can you be more specific?

**Steve:** Well, for example, there's the tall Czech kid with the frizzy hair—Jan, he's the mic boom operator—and the blond, bug-eyed Valley Girl—Eva, she's the DP. They're drinking bottled water over by the snack table because bottled water is all that's left. I can hear them talking now, actually.

"How'd you get the DP gig?" Jan's asking.

"Extortion," Eva replies. "And you?"

"What do you mean?"

"How'd Ernie sucker you into doing this travesty of a movie trailer?"

"I just wanted to help out," Jan says.

**Steve:** Wow. Eva has a really, *really* mean scowl.

## Mole Asses

**Steve:** Oh, snap. I think the lead kid just showed up. It was supposed to be Theo Ivanovich. I guess they replaced him at the last minute. Sorry if my replies get a little slow, DiaryGPT, but as the production's BTS guy, I'm expected to document moments like this. Fortunately, I'm pretty good at holding my camera and texting at the same time.

**DiaryGPT:** Who ate the walrus?

**Steve:** You're telling me. Ernest is going *off*—he's all, "You're late!"

And the lead kid's like, "Traffic."

"Traffic my shiny, buttered behind! You *downloaded* here!"

"Internet traffic is still traffic."

"And what the hell is *this?*" Ernest's waving his hand at the lead kid's torso. Maybe he's put on weight since he first signed on? It happened with Brando in *Apocalypse Now*.

"Just be happy I showed up at all."

"Except you're skinned as the tired old ghost of *Puck Martin* when you *should* be 'Theo Ivanovich as Junior Zang!'"

"Hey, I promised to star in your movie trailer, fatness. You didn't say anything about me having to be default while doing it."

**Steve:** Oh, I get it. The black-and-white monkey-boy motif threw me—Theo's still the lead, he's just skinned a few years younger...and a few shades paler.

**DiaryGPT:** The answer to your question is 42.

**Steve:** I'll keep that in mind, DiaryGPT. Meantime, Ernest's still going off: "If I'd *wanted* a retro deepfaker to star in my movie, I would've *asked* for a retro deepfaker

to star in my movie!"

"*Trailer,"* Theo adds with a smirk.

"*Trailer!"*

**Steve:** I feel like there's an inside joke there, but I don't get it. Side note—it looks like Mrs. Ivanovich, an older guy with a cardboard cutout of his wife, and a couple of well-to-do suburbanites are all being detained over at the download tent. I'm thinking they want to sit in during the shoot, but the beefy security guards don't seem to be budging on the closed-set policy.

"Get default!" That's Ernest yelling some more.

But Theo's not having any of it. "Take it or leave it, fat stuff."

**DiaryGPT:** Tell me about your father.

**Steve:** Maybe later, DiaryGPT. Ernest and Theo are facing each other nose to nose now, and it looks like they're about to throw down.

"You never said anything about pulling this RKO zombie-child stunt!" Ernest is saying.

"And *you* should've known better than to blackmail me into doing your movie trailer in the first place," Theo replies.

Oh, this is good stuff—Ernest is staring Theo down; Theo is staring right back. You could hear a pin drop...if anyone had thought to bring one. And if the ground wasn't all dirt and weeds.

The DP's walking over. "Um, excuse me, Heckle? Jeckle?"

The guys both glare at her.

She taps an imaginary watch on her wrist. "We're burning daylight here."

Ernest throws his arms up in the air. "Fine—places everyone! And...*action!*"

"You're just going to shoot Theo in black-and white—"

"We'll fix it in post!"

"—even though the rest of the movie is in color?"

"*I said action!*"

**Steve:** I have a feeling this is going to be a long day.

**DiaryGPT:** Do you have anything else you'd like to talk about before your free trial of DiaryGPT expires?

**Steve:** It says "mole asses" in the ingredients list on my bag of pretzels. Do you think that's just a typo?

## Excerpt: Monkey-Boys in Outer Space

Director Quinlan Tarantina Reflects On *The Vaudevillian's* Dubious Legacy

*The Vaudevillian* (also known as *Starsweepers*, *Spacesweepers*, and *(Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers: An Ernest Goodale Production*) is one of those rare cinematic moments where the making-of documentary is better than the actual movie itself. *Unmaking a Dream* was Steve Sneddon's breakthrough, chronicling his experiences on the set of what many consider to be the worst movie trailer ever made. The gestalt image was Sneddon's thing—he could sum up anyone or anything with a single frame. He nailed *The Vaudevillian* perfectly in the now-infamous closing shot of the *Unmaking* trailer: you've got monkey-boy Theo Ivanovich posing in the dressing room with his laser gun and wearing nothing but his cheesy red space briefs; you've got director Ernest Goodale, producer Mini Ivanovich, and the wardrobe gal looking on in a mixture of horror and fascination; you've got the DP calling through the door, "Well? How's it look?" Everyone in the room swallows hard and looks at each other for the longest, most uncomfortable beat you ever saw before Goodale hastily proclaims, "Okay, so I was wrong about the space briefs!"

Then—*bam!* Title card. Credits. "In theaters March 15."

That single space briefs shot made Steve Sneddon a documentary superhero.

It also sealed Ernest Goodale's fate as a filmmaker.

Whether by intentional genius or lucky accident, *Unmaking a Dream* told an entire story using nothing more than some behind-the-scenes footage of a kid wearing a monkey suit—and space briefs. Yes, there were legion budget, legal, and logistical issues from the very beginning. But *The Vaudevillian's* real problem?

*It shouldn't have been a movie trailer in the first place.*

It should've been a movie trailer *about* a movie trailer.

Imagine an alternate reality in which Ernest Goodale had shot, say, a raunchy comedy trailer about a bunch of suburban besties trying to make their own *Junior Carter of Mars*, *Boris Vallejo for Kids*, or whatever. Don't get me wrong—the movie industry is a fickle business. It's an uphill battle all the way up *and* down. But I think the movie trailer about a movie trailer idea would've at least had a chance in hell. Instead, *The Vaudevillian* became the ultimate deadpan, taking itself so seriously that even Steven Seagal himself would've tapped out. That's Hollywood for you, though. There are hits, there are misses...and then there's *The Vaudevillian...*

**Read the full article in this week's issue of *The Angelican*!**

# A Princess Darkly

She was Celesta, Princess of Vulva—until a bitter disagreement behind the scenes got her dethroned. Self-proclaimed blood metal slash action figure rock siren and social media starlet Asia Afrodesia tells her side of the story in this exclusive interview with *The Daily Angel*.

* * *

**It's safe to say the vast majority of the Internet knows why you're here instead of on the set of the much-maligned *Starsweepers Spacesweepers (Not) That Other Movie, Space Sweepers: An Ernest Goodale Production The Vaudevillian*.**

I've been "performing" on-camera since I was "eighteen," and *The Vaudevillian* is one-hundred-percent the most jacked-up production I've ever been involved with. The director—Ernest Goodale—is an ass-taxi. Every day of shooting so far has gone overtime. The budget has ballooned from six to seven figures. Major script re-writes are coming in daily—sometimes multiple times per day and scribbled on the backs of honey bun boxes. You've heard the expression two-steps forward, one step back? This was no steps forward, three steps back. At some point, you've got to ask yourself, "What the hell am I doing here?"

**How did you first get involved with the project?**

It was a friend of a friend kind of thing. I'd worked with the lead, Theo Ivanovich, back during his #luckylittledude days. He also maintains my official Web site. *Total* cutie pie—love you, babe! Anyway, I got a call from the film's producer asking if I was interested in playing Princess Celesta. Tons of nudity, sex, and graphic violence. Of *course* I was in!

**Was the raunchy, unbridled nature of *The Vaudevillian* a prerequisite for your accepting the role of Celesta?**

*Duh*. Like I said, I've been doing this kind of thing forever. It gets old after a while. I mean, there are only so many ways a couple can get off together, right? Then along comes this script that was, like, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, and *Heavy Metal* all in one, and I was like...eff yeah! I've *got* to do this! I told my agent.

There was a point very early on when *The Vaudevillian* promised to be my *The Ten Commandments* or *Spartacus* or whatever. I was over the moon until filming began.

**It quickly went downhill from there?**

You have to make it *uphill* before you can go *downhill*. Day one, Theo shows up to set skinned as some black-and-white kid from the RKO days. I guess he had beef with Goodale, and so was technically fulfilling his contract while sticking it to him at the same time. I've got no problem throwing my mack where it's needed, but apparently nobody had permission from Cameron Beaumont or his family to use his likeness in the movie. So, it was awkward being in the middle of that feud. It was also awkward having to kneel and pledge allegiance to Myron Deathkill every morning—that's Goodale's *Hella War* gaming persona. He started wearing it to set in the hopes the cast and crew would pay him more respect. It only made him more obnoxious.

**Fast-forward to the halfway point, and the major disagreement that erupted between you and Goodale: the Junior/Celesta love scene. Goodale said you went too far, but you say you didn't go far enough.**

Exactly.

"**Far enough" being...?**

So, the second act of the movie is basically about Junior's survival on this wild, savage planet way out on the other side of the galaxy. There's a sequence where he and I are on the run from the evil Kaplorts. We manage to escape into the desert, and the little dude finds us shelter, builds a fire, hunts dinner. It's nightfall. I'm strung out and all, and Junior talks me down, you know? There's the two of us all alone out in the middle of nowhere, we don't even know if we'll be alive in the morning, you've got this giant alien moon cresting behind us, we've survived a harrowing experience—I was fine with a little simulated nookie as long as I called the shots. But Goodale gave me some BS about not liking that *I* was the instigator. He said it was too woke.

**Might the situation have been downplayed if you hadn't insisted on performing fully nude throughout the movie?**

Hey, my body is my product. If Goodale can't stand up for his actors' creative integrity, that's his loss. After a while, they were just shooting around me, and it was like, that's it—I'm done. Supposedly Ernie brought in someone else to finish my parts. But I think peeps are going to notice halfway through when Princess

Celesta's cooch is suddenly missing and/or being played by an entirely different cooch.

**How would you respond to Goodale's comment, and I quote, "Asia Afrodesia may be able to suck a duck onstage like nobody's business, but she can't act for sh*t."**

Screw you, Ernest Goodale.

# One Day We'll All Be Holograms

**@eva**

It's weird being here in the studio, though not because I haven't been interviewed on TV hundreds of times before. Heck, during my stint working for the Kounicova campaign I probably logged hundreds of hours in front of (as well as behind) a camera. No, it's weird now because after all these years, after all this time, I'm finally okay talking openly about...*it*. I don't *want* to (who would?), but I'm also not going to dodge the inevitable questions about that certain specific part of my life anymore. I've had my career, raised my family, made my peace.

Still.

It's weird.

Being interviewed by Milton Shaftburger's hologram.

Nearly seventy years after the fact.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Milton's hologram says once we're back from commercial. "Eighty years old this weekend."

"Thanks for pointing that out," I reply, feigning a little old-fashioned self-consciousness.

"You don't look a day over twenty, my dear."

That's because I'm not, physically. Nobody's physically older than eighteen to twenty-one these days except maybe the hardcore defaults. I mean, why age and die when you can simply use SuperMegaNet to uninstall any unwanted years? I don't want to imagine a world without Vin Diesel in *Fast and Furious 26*, do you?

Playing along with Milton's hologram's compliment: "You're just saying that."

He pauses for applause—then does an abrupt pivot, both topically and physically: "I'm Milton Shaftburger's hologram, let's get hard with Eva Taylor."

Smalltalk cancelled, apparently.

"*The Vaudevillian*. How does it feel to have contributed to what has become universally regarded as the worst movie trailer ever made?"

"It gets easier to talk about with the passage of time."

"I've got the what. Now give me the why."

"Well, I think you sort of stop caring about the drama after a while. You stop trying to please everyone. You kind of clear out all the emotional garbage. My friends and I made a movie trailer decades ago. Everyone hated it. Lives were lost. Governments crumbled. Laws were passed banning the trailer's public performance. So what? It's done. You can't change the past. More importantly, you shouldn't *want* to change the past. I think as I've gotten older, I've come to

understand that better, both with regard to *The Vaudevillian* and my own life in general."

Milton's hologram adjusts his giant schoolteacher glasses, reads from a holographic index card that, if you look closely, is completely blank (because as we all know, androids don't dream of electric sheep, and holograms have no use for index cards). "Here's an abbreviated list of *The Vaudevillian's* many dubious distinctions: winner of nineteen Razzie Awards; Guinness World Record holder as the most expensive movie trailer ever produced at just shy of twenty-million dollars; no fewer than seven stunt performers and acrobats killed or severely injured on set, including national champions Summer Jackson and Lilith Kraemer; numerous environmental, child labor, and animal welfare laws broken; multiple allegations of indecent exposure, mostly involving Asia Afrodesia; thirty-five lawsuits for IP theft and copyright infringement, not the least of which was the unauthorized and repeated use of Cameron Beaumont's likeness by Theo Ivanovich."

"Wow," I reply. "We really *did* make the world's worst movie trailer, didn't we?"

"Give it to me hard, Eva. If the schematics for Elon Musk, Jr.'s alleged TimeX were leaked online, would you travel back in time to prevent *The Vaudevillian* from ever being made?"

Milton's hologram has done his homework—I actually had lunch with Musk last week to discuss that very idea, though, admittedly, we never got past the usual temporal paradox issues. "We were just kids. We had no clue what we were getting ourselves into. But I'd rather have tried and failed than not tried at all. Don't get me wrong, I'd delete the trailer off the face of the Earth if I could...kind of like George Lucas with the *Star Wars Holiday Special* LucasNet became the world's dominant ISP in the late 2020s. I've also come to accept the reality. It's like my friend Jan once said after we lost our seventh stunt performer in a freak smoke machine accident: 'Maybe the thing isn't to live forever, it's just to live right now.' If we'd known that before *The Vaudevillian*, maybe we'd have spared the world unnecessary fallout from our own ludicrous attempt at immortality."

"I'm Milton Shaftburger's hologram, we'll be back after these messages."

# Ultimatum

**@theo**

It's late-night power hour. Ernie's with me, and is skinned as the venerable Myron Deathkill. We're at The Billboard—you know, that bar and grill that's literally built into the back of a billboard overlooking the twinkling San Angelico valley? It used to be one of Beta's favorite haunts. I like it because the veggie and gluten-free menu items are just as good as the regular ones.

It's also as good a place as any to change the world.

Ahead of us, a pair of bros are placing their order, the louder and more obnoxious one patting the countertop loudly and, in a thick beach bum accent, declaring to the burgerista, "Prote and Coke, bro!"

Beside me, Ernie waves a meaty arm at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It's bro for 'protein and Coca Cola,'" I reply. "Meaning he wants his burger protein-style, with Coca Cola to drink."

"Effing bros. Always lowering the bar." Ernie steps forward when it's our turn and addresses the burgerista with authority. "I'll have five quadruple beef patty melts, a family-sized box of fries, a gigando Dr. Pepper, and whatever the kid wants."

"Gee, couldn't I and everyone else here just share off your tray?"

Ernie air-slaps me across the face. "Myron is *not* amused."

I place my order and pay for the both of us. Once our food's ready, we grab our trays, find a dimly-lit booth in the back. We sit together on one side of the table, leaving the other side free.

"So...not that I'm in any way tapping out here," Ernie says, "but are you sure you want to do this?"

Resting my hands on the tabletop and staring off into the distance, I say, "After everything that happened with *The Vaudevillian*—"

"Hey, I said I was sorry! You *know* I said I was sorry!"

"I know. And I want to thank you."

"What the hell for?"

"You made me realize real life is so much more...mutable. Attainable. *Possible*. If I survived the Santanas, DOSVID-19, *The Vaudevillian* I can survive anything. I'm done living in fear, done playing by other people's rules, living other people's lives for them. I'm done with it all."

"Careful there. With nuts that big, you're liable to burst right out of your shorts."

I take out my phone and bring up SuperMegaNet.

Momentarily, Megalomoolson download across from us. The two of them are default—way less conspicuous as middle-aged men than as their African god and sword-wielding *samurai* alter-egos.

We regard each other quietly, carefully.

Watching and waiting.

Waiting and watching—

—Ernie's stomach grumbles loudly.

"Enough pussyfooting," he says, and grabs a handful of fries, starts unwrapping one of his burgers with his free hand. "You three get this thing started while I feed the tapeworm."

*Ew...*

"*Figuwe of speeff!*" he clarifies with his mouth full.

Facing Megalomoolson again, I take a deep breath, reach into my pocket, pull out the memory card. Hold it up for both men to see.

"What?" Coolson asks, shrugging, one arm draped nonchalantly over the back of his chair. "What's that supposed to be?"

"It's your careers," Mini explains as he crawls out of my messenger bag and climbs onto the table. "It's your careers, reputations, and overall livelihoods."

"Is that what we're doing? Speaking in tongues all night? Because I can get that by calling any given customer service line."

Mini waves a mitt at the memory card. "This is the memory card from Steve Sneddon's camera. Particularly, it's the one he was using the night he recorded your off-the-cuff reveal that everything post-dosequisvirus is a sham."

A lock of hair quietly dislodges itself from Coolson's comb-over.

"You *do* remember that night in the kitchen when you so eloquently spilled the beans and then totaled Steve's camera?"

Megalomoto frowns.

Coolson's comb-over loses another lock of hair. "Okay, kid. What do you want?"

Mini nods encouragingly at me.

"You're going to put things back the way they were," I tell Coolson. "Before the Boho Mandate, the rolling power-ons, the sheen checks—things are going to be like they were...*before*."

"Yeah," Ernie mumbles. "Go back to screwing the city over through tax hikes and rigged elections."

"*And*," I continue, now fixing Mr. Megalomoto with a steady gaze, "you're going to break up with my mom. You're going to be out of the house and out of our lives by this time tomorrow. Keep your money and power, but leave us out of it."

Megalomoto clasps his hands placidly, meeting my gaze with his own. Holding it unwaveringly. "Young Master Ivanovich. That's quite a list of demands—"

Coolson scoffs and grabs the memory card from me, hurls it onto the floor, stomps on it with both feet. "*Ha!* Problem solved! You got nothing on us, kid! The

Mandate continues, boho or nothing, T&A forever, bitches!"

(Hi there, folks sitting at the next table and wondering what the heck our problem is.)

"Dumbass," Ernie chuckles. "The card was a *symbolic* gesture. Do you think junior here was dumb enough not to make multiple copies for safe keeping?" He pauses, blinks at me. "You *did* make copies, right?"

I nod.

"Damn it!" Coolson kicks at the memory card once more, sits back down. Starts nibbling his fingernails loudly and nervously.

"Do what you will, Master Ivanovich," Megalomoto tells me, "but keep in mind that I have your friend Beta on my servers. It would be the utmost shame for something to...happen to him."

"Delete him and we go public," Mini says.

Ernie belches in support.

"Go public, and we delete your Betamax friend—how about *that*, genius?" Coolson nudges Megalomoto in the ribs with his elbow.

Silence falls over the table.

Ernie continues to eat.

Coolson continues to nibble.

Finally, Megalomoto nods and says, "It would seem we've reached an impasse. I agree to your terms, Master Ivanovich."

"Are you kidding me?" Coolson asks. "You're going to give the brats what they want?"

"We have been defeated, Dude."

"Don't give me any of that 'lose the battle to win the war' drivel—"

"*We have been defeated.*"

Coolson holds up his hand in protest—and suddenly realizes, much to our horror as well as his own, that he's accidentally nibbled off the tip of his index finger. "Oh, *crap!*" Cradling his bloodied fist against his chest, he staggers to his feet and bolts for the men's room.

Megalomoto continues to hold my gaze, unperturbed. "Will that be all, young Master Ivanovich?"

I think for a sec. "I also want every copy of *The Vaudevillian* ever made to be erased from existence."

Ernie flicks me off without conviction.

# Fartemis Foul

**@theo**

It's the first day of school since the Mandate ended, and I'm standing alone in a fully-dressed crowd out on Boca Linda High's front lawn. Nobody's skimping anymore, nobody's carrying a spray bottle or social-distancing. Even I've ditched the Shakaist attire in favor of my regular hoodie, joggers, and sneakers combo (because isn't the whole point of Shakaism moot if you have to dress a certain way to maintain your inner island paradise?). This should be a momentous occasion. Instead, I kind of feel like I did my very first day of high school ever, back when I was twelve years old and without a clue or a friend in the world. I'm not regretting San Angelico returning to its regularly-scheduled programming. I just...there's some kind of unanswered question scratching at the back of my mind.

"Good morning, Theo," Jan greets, uploading beside me in his latest designer jeans and neon tank top. "What's up?"

Hm. That's not the unanswered question. Nevertheless, I smile and respond appropriately: "Nothing. You?"

"Nadia."

"*Nada.*"

"Oh, right."

We're standing around and waiting for the warning bell when Eva uploads. Warm-up suit, sneakers, ponytail, etc.

"Did you guys hear that 3 Hags' Doughnuts is going actual again?" she asks.

Nope. Not the unanswered question, either—but heck yeah anyway!

We stand around waiting some more for the warning bell.

Right when it rings, and we're starting across the virtual lawn toward the virtual school building, Ernie uploads haphazardly behind us, huffing and puffing to keep up and swearing something under his breath about his grandparents cramping his style. "How much corduroy do those cretins think I can take before I'm legally over the limit?!"

Still not the unanswered question.

The Runt Squad now assembled in its entirety, we stroll onward, Boca Linda's façade looming ever closer with each step, all four of us feeling in and out of place, both at once, as the older kids pass us by, lost in their phones, lost in their own individual worlds, completely oblivious to us. I ponder my unanswered question some more, thinking maybe it's got something to do with Mr. Megalomoto no doubt pacing his office this very moment and cursing my name. Or Dude Coolson

standing in line at Spendco with a box of Band-Aids and lamenting the inadvertent digestion of his own index finger. Or Beta skinned as a ninja and infiltrating Megalomoto Industries from the inside out, one byte at a time. Mom and Dad having their first tentative breakfast together since the break-up. Maybe none of the above.

Then, out of nowhere, Eva hits the nail on the head, asking, "So, what do we do now?"

*A-ha!* The unanswered question!

We all look at each other.

Ernie adjusts his beanie, clears his throat. "I once took a dump, and it sounded like the start screen sound effect from *Dracula X*."

I smirk. "I guess that's a start."

"Screen," Eva adds.

"Totally," Jan agrees.

## About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.